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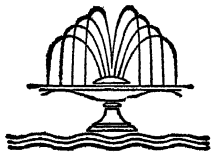
All Change, Humanity!

BY

CLAUDE HOUGHTON

Obdurate spirit!
Thou seest but the Past in the To-come.

HELLAS.



Collins Publishers
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1942

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Part I

THE SANE

CHAPTER I

Adventure in Paris: May 1938

I

I WRITE this story because I am convinced that it has to be written, and because I can reveal it from more angles than any man living. Bar one. And he certainly would not write it. But it is essential to regard me merely as a uniquely placed spectator of remarkable events. In myself, I am of no importance.

My name is Vincent Drake.

On a certain morning in May 1938 I was sitting at a table outside a café in the Place du Tertre. I had exactly ten pounds in the world. And no visible prospect of another sixpence.

It was a misty May morning, drowsily aware of its dream-like beauty. Arrows of light glinted through the leaves of the blossoming acacias while the shadows of the old houses stealthily became more defined, but before long the mist was a vanishing wraith and the coloured awnings of the cafés—and the gay umbrellas over the tables in the Square—began to glow in the glimmering sunshine.

Although I had not a guess what would happen when I became penniless, I was not worrying in the least about the future as I sat at that table in the Place du Tertre. It has been said that a man on his way to execution takes remarkable interest in the most trivial everyday events. That may or may not be true, but it is certain that I was more concerned with the activities of others in the Place du Tertre than I was with my own affairs.

For several minutes I watched two artists: one, a young man in a blue blouse, who had just set up his easel in a far corner of the Square; the other, an elderly man with a mane of grey hair, who was working a few yards from my table. It seemed to me that the latter had chosen the more surprising aspect of the Square, as he had an oblique view of the street leading out of it—that steep, narrow, cobbled street, which is dominated and dwarfed by the great dome of the Sacré Cœur.

Then two American tourists appeared who, having looked at all the old print shops, and having examined the date, 1790, inscribed over No. 3—once the mayoralty of the village of Montmartre—proceeded to study the Place du Tertre, guide books in hand.

It is extraordinary how clearly I remember every incident which occurred while I sat at that table in the May sunshine. I can see the student who passed with his arm round a girl—and the empty crates

piled high on the pavement outside the café on the corner. I can see the old Square with its dusty pebbles, which looked like a beach unvisited by the tide, and I can smell the faint fragrance of the acacias, when the breeze stirred their blossoming boughs.

The mellow tranquillity of the place evoked its own serenity. I forgot I was a pauper. I seemed to see everything under its eternal, not its temporal, aspect—and this rare mood of contemplation reduced personal problems to insignificance. I was alive—I was well—I was alone in the world. It did not seem to matter a lot what happened when my ten pounds were gone and I found myself penniless.

I note these details of time, place, and mood because they are important. They were the prelude to unsuspected and unimaginable adventure. Adventure which, seemingly, was wholly dependent on my being in the Place du Tertre on a particular morning in May 1938.

I must have drifted into a day-dream as I sat at that table in the sunshine—because I started violently on hearing someone exclaim:

"Well, I will be damned!"

I looked up—to find Arthur Mannering gazing down at me with an expression of amused astonishment.

I suppose we stared at each other for nearly half a minute before he repeated, emphasizing each word:

"Well, I will be damned!"

I got up and we shook hands.

"It's the third time, Mannering."

"Yes—the third. And you said, if it happened again, it wouldn't be chance."

"And *you* said—it wouldn't happen again."

"Well, it has. Rio—New York—and now Paris. Let's have a drink, Drake. I need one. I'm in a jam—and a pretty fantastic one."

"I'm in a bit of a jam myself."

"Not like mine. You couldn't be. No one could be."

A waiter appeared and Mannering ordered drinks, then he explained how extraordinary it was that he had wandered into the Place du Tertre. He had had no intention of going to the Left Bank when he set out from his hotel. He did not realize he had crossed the river till he found himself in a network of narrow cobbled streets, but, eventually, he had recognized his whereabouts and had decided to stroll round the old Square.

While he talked I watched him. He had taken off his black soft hat and was sitting cross-legged, leaning back in his chair. It was two years since I had seen Mannering, and my first impression was that he had not altered. Actually, he looked younger. If I had not known that he was thirty-six, I should have guessed his age at just over thirty.

Physically, he was one of the most attractive men I have met: tall, powerfully built, with thick fair hair, boldly-cut features, and fine blue eyes. He had the rare gifts of being graceful in every attitude—and at ease in any company.

Mannering suddenly interrupted what he was saying in order to look round, then exclaim:

"It's nice here—awfully nice!"

The remark was so characteristic that it was difficult not to smile. I have never known any one who derived such sensuous delight from pleasant surroundings as Mannering. Even when he started to talk again, I knew that his rich indolent nature was luxuriating in the sunshine—the scent of the acacias—the coming and going of men and women in the shadow-haunted Square. Unlike most people, Mannering lived through all his senses simultaneously. He was one for whom "the visible world exists," and his almost boyish delight in it was infectious. He radiated sensuous gaiety. I am not surprised he was very popular with women.

Actually, I knew very little about him. Five years ago, I had run into him in the bar of the Palace Hotel at Rio. It was his first visit and, as I knew Rio fairly well, I showed him round. Incidentally, I valued his companionship more than he knew—because I had just made a decision which left me as isolated as a shipwrecked man on a raft.

Three years later, I ran into him as he was coming out of his hotel in New York. We spent over a week together, then he returned to England—and I never expected to see him again. I remember he said, when we parted, that we could leave Chance to arrange our next meeting—as it had already contrived one at Rio and another in New York. And I told him that, if we met again, it would be difficult to ascribe it to Chance.

And, now, here we were together in the Place du Tertre!

It follows that I knew very little about Mannering. Unless the circumstances are exceptional, you do not learn much about a man through two bird-of-passage meetings. I knew little more of Mannering than an intelligent observer could have deduced from his appearance. It was evident that he was well born, and had had the traditional English education. His easy self-confidence—his tolerant attitude to criticism—his insistence on certain standards—made that very clear. Even his geniality was rooted in his innate sense of superiority. Everything about him proclaimed that the world had always treated people like the Mannerings very well, and he instinctively assumed that it would continue to do so. That was in the eternal order of things. And a very admirable arrangement it was.

The fact that mankind had always made life easy for people like the Mannerings was evidence of the fundamental good sense of humanity.

He would never have formulated these values, because one does not formulate instinctive assumptions, but everything about him implied them—his gestures, his carriage, and the unobtrusive perfection of his clothes. You had only to see him in order to know his social background. What you had to discover was his lazy, luxury-loving nature.

I must add that—from the first hour of our first meeting at Rio—Mannering had decided that I was "queer." But he did not mind that. In fact, he rather liked it. Queer people were amusing and they were a change. They gave a distorted reflection of the world in which Arthur Mannering was so happily at home.

Just as he came to the end of what he was saying, a woman passed our table and glanced at us with some curiosity. As she was attractive, Mannering watched her till she disappeared, then turned and said:

"She's the autumnal type. You know what I mean? Mellow, matured—memory-haunted. One ought to meet her when leaves are falling, and everything is misty and melancholy. She's one of those women who turn you temporarily into a different person. One could love her rapturously for a fortnight."

"Which is your definition of fidelity?"

"Oh no, my dear fellow. A month is fidelity. Anything less is only an affair. I say, though!" he exclaimed. "Did you notice how she stared? I'm certain she thought she knew us."

"Not a bit of it! She was interested by the contrast between us. And I'm not surprised."

These remarks evidently impressed Mannering, because he looked me over critically. Then, having appreciated the condition of the only suit I possessed, he said casually:

"You'll have to take a pull on yourself, Drake. You will, really. I'm the one who has an excuse for looking under the weather, not you."

"You won't find it easy to make me believe that," I said with some emphasis.

"It's perfectly true. I tell you I'm in an absurd position. I've got to find a man for a fantastic—but important—job. And I've got to find him in four days. What do you think of that?"

"It's a fearful problem," I replied. "All the same, I'd rather be in your position than mine—because I've got to *find* a job."

I was going on to explain my position, but stopped short, because Mannering was staring at me with an expression little removed from consternation.

"You've got to *find* a job!" he exploded. "*You* want a job?"

"Desperately."

"You'd take anything?"

"Anything."

"You wouldn't mind a certain amount of risk?"

"Not in the least. What have I to lose? I'm forty. I've ten pounds in the world. I'm completely untrained. So I'm not expecting a rapturous reception when I enter the labour market of 1938."

But it was evident that Mannering had heard only half of that, because he was still staring at me with an expression in which amazement and something like fear were equally blended.

"My God! this beats everything! Now—listen! Would you take a job as companion to a man who has been in a mental home for the last two years? A man who has just been certified sane?"

"I certainly would! It would be a privilege, nowadays, to spend one's days with a man who has been *certified* sane."

"I'm not joking, Drake."

"I'm very glad to hear it. But how could you give me the job? What do you know about me?"

"All that can be damned! If you knew the inane circumstances in which I've been told to find someone for this job, you wouldn't be surprised that I'm not worrying about trifles like that. Besides, you're all right. I'd back my instincts on that. You're queer, of course, but that's a qualification."

"What's the name of the man who has just been certified sane?"

"Christopher Bell."

"Christopher Bell," I echoed. "Somehow that's familiar. I'm certain I met someone once who knew Christopher Bell."

"That's quite possible."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"He's my half-brother."

After a pause, Mannering added:

"It's only fair to tell you that the family are convinced that Christopher is still mad—despite the fact that he's been certified sane."

"That doesn't bother me. I tell you frankly—if you offer me this job, I shall take it. That's definite. So you'd better think again before you make a firm offer."

"The job's yours, my dear fellow, if you'll have it. It's worth ten pounds a week, and there's a hundred down for preliminary expenses."

"Christopher Bell must be quite a rich man."

"He's fabulously rich."

"Fabulously?"

"Yes. God alone knows what he's worth. The whole Mannering family are spending sleepless nights about it."

"Why?"

"Because Christopher is master of his fortune again. He's sane—so he can do what he likes with his own money. That terrifies the family—because they're certain he is still mad."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty. If you take this job, Drake, you will go to his house in Meridian Square—which is in Knightsbridge—and wait till Christopher turns up."

"And when will that be?"

"I haven't a guess."

After a silence, Mannering went on:

"You'd better understand this, right from the beginning. If you go into this business, you're going into a very mysterious affair. And that's an understatement. Also, you're going to find that you are a target. That's too long to go into, but you can take it from me it's true. Thank heaven, I'm getting away from it all."

"Why? What's happening to you?"

"I go to America on Friday. I shall be there for a year. I'll tell you why later. Anyway, I'm going."

"And you had to find a companion for Christopher Bell before you left?"

"Yes. And that was *his* decision. I wrote him, three days ago, telling him I was going away, and that he'd have to find someone himself, as I knew of no one who was suitable. I had a post card from him, this morning, saying that I should find someone before I left. And now, by God! I've found you!"

Mannering leaned across the table, then went on:

"This will sound quite mad to you, but I believe he *knew* I should run into you. There's something damned queer about him. He's clairvoyant—or something. Anyway, I loathe mysteries. That's one reason why I'm glad I'm going away. But if you, or any one else, think I am going to bother whether you are the man for the job, I can assure you I'm not. It's you, or no one, so far as I am concerned. I refuse to take any responsibility. I shall make that very clear to Christopher. *He's* going to be responsible."

"And I'm going to take the job, Mannering. But I can't give any references."

"You'd ask for them—if you knew the Mannerings. You're going to earn that ten pounds a week, Drake."

He handed me a cigarette, then lit one himself. Neither spoke for some minutes, but at last I said:

"Perhaps I'd better tell you something about myself. Otherwise, your people will think you are out of your mind to give this job to a man you know nothing about."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Well, to begin with, I'm only half English. My mother was French. I didn't have too good a time as a child—and I was alone in the world when I was twenty. Five years later, I came into a hundred a year. For the next ten years I was an artist. Then—just before I ran into you in Rio—I gave it up."

"Why?"

"Because I had only talent—and talent isn't enough."

"Why not?"

"In this world, Mannering, you must be either a genius, or a nit-wit. Anything between the two is sheer hell."

"I shouldn't think it's a lot of fun being a genius," he said lazily.

"Of course it isn't! Every genius must suffer the torments of the damned, but his suffering isn't meaningless. That's the whole point. It's redeemed by the fact that it achieves unique expression. Anyway, talent wasn't enough for me, so I gave up being an artist."

"What did you do?"

"Wandered about the world, looking at it, and picking up all sorts of people *en route*. That's been my life for the last five years. I'm a real expert on cheap travel. Well, a month ago, I heard that my hundred a year had vanished. So here I am—forty years old, with ten pounds in the world. And that's why there isn't a job which you or any one else could offer me which I wouldn't take."

"That's good enough for me. Could you go to London to-morrow?"

"I could go to-night."

"To-morrow's soon enough. We'll do something amusing to-night. And now I'm going to order some more drinks. Then I'll tell you something about the Mannerings—and something about the very odd situation in which you'll soon find yourself."

He beckoned the waiter, ordered some drinks, then lit another cigarette.

II

For some moments Mannering smoked in silence while he looked approvingly round the Square. Eventually, having watched a remarkably well-made girl till she disappeared, he turned and said:

"There are several facts which you must get into your head, Drake, and the first is that my family was thrown completely out of gear by the extraordinary behaviour of my mother. Every one of us is paying for that to this day. She deserted us—and she created the devil's own scandal. It's difficult to cause a scandal nowadays, because all standards have gone to hell, but I'm talking about 1907."

"And what did she do—in 1907?"

"That comes later. She was a Teasdale—Viola Teasdale—and——"

"You don't mean the famous beauty!"

"So even you had heard of her."

I ignored the "even" and said:

"I saw her photograph in a newspaper when I was a child. I suppose I was about eight. It was an overwhelming experience to discover that there was any one in the world as lovely as she was."

"I believe it. Old men still talk about her in the clubs. She had the kind of beauty that made you gasp. Such beauty in a woman is the equivalent to genius in a man—and both play the devil with ordinary people."

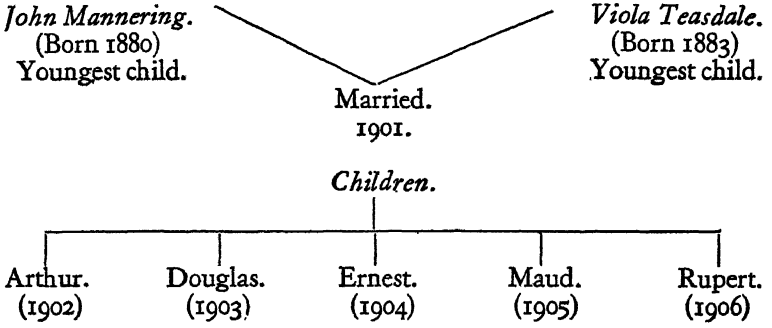
Mannering hesitated for a moment, then produced paper and a pencil.

"I'm going to make a rough chart of the family, Drake. It won't take long. And it will give you some idea of the situation."

Some minutes later he said:

"There you are. It's very crude, but it will do."

The following is an exact copy of the chart he handed me.



John Mannering died in 1907 (Viola was then 24).
Three *months* later
Viola married Alastair Bell.
In 1908 Christopher Bell was born.

I studied this for some minutes, then, just as I was about to speak, Mannering stopped me with a gesture.

"Better keep that in front of you, Drake—and listen to me."

Almost immediately he went on:

"You see that my father and mother were the youngest of their respective families. As those families were very numerous, it follows that I have hordes of uncles and aunts—and an army of cousins. There are Mannerings and Teasdales everywhere."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic about it."

"I'm not. You'll also see that my parents married absurdly young. It was arranged when they were in the cradle. Incidentally, the Mannerings and Teasdales have been marrying each other for about three hundred years. Which may be one reason why so many of them are eccentric."

"What interests me," I said slowly, still looking at the chart, "is that your mother had a child a year for five years."

"That didn't mean a thing to her—physically, or in any other way. It didn't touch her figure—and it didn't touch *her*. She made that quite clear by marrying Alastair Bell."

"You mean the famous Alastair Bell? The explorer?"

"Yes. No one even knew that Viola had met him. So you can imagine the effect—in 1907—when she married Bell three *months* after my father's death. There was the devil's own scandal. Its ghost lingers to this day. Mouldering old uncles and tremulous old aunts still whisper about it over the Christmas log—and shake their ancient heads despondently."

"What happened after their marriage?"

"All sorts of things happened. She and Alastair went abroad—and stayed abroad. He was sun, moon, and stars to her. Everything she had known before marrying him was just obliterated. Literally, *everything*. To be fair to her, you must remember that she had married my father when she was eighteen. And she certainly was never in the least in love with him. Anyway, Alastair swept her away like a tidal wave."

After a silence, Mannering went on:

"You can imagine what happened to the children. I was the oldest—and I was five. We were all brought up by various uncles and aunts, so we didn't see a lot of one another. These uncles and aunts were rabid about Viola, consequently we were raised on a never-ending list of her infamies."

He broke off, then added:

"It's damned odd, Drake, that her photograph had such an effect on you when you were eight, because her beauty haunted my child-

hood. I didn't care tuppence what they all said about her. While I listened to them, I saw *her*. And she seemed worth all of them rolled together."

"But what about the money position after she married Alastair Bell?"

Somewhat to my surprise, Mannering burst out laughing.

"Rich or poor, Drake, young or old, the Mannerings have only one problem—MONEY. You'll see. You're going to make some interesting discoveries."

He laughed again, then went on:

"Anyway, after Viola deserted us, we had to cultivate our financial chances with various uncles and aunts. From very early days we were schemers and intriguers. Remember that. It's important. Some of us succeeded, and some didn't. You've got to understand that a lot of money which would have come to Viola—did not come."

"All the same, you don't seem to have done so badly."

"It's not so good as it looks, my dear fellow. Not by a long way. I'll explain that later. I tell you again that Viola's marriage to Alastair threw the whole family out of gear."

"What happened to your mother and Alastair Bell?"

"They were killed in a flying accident in 1921."

After a pause, Mannering added:

"I won't tell you a lot about my brothers. Douglas and Ernest are married—and you'll see what they have made of it. You won't learn a lot about my sister, Maud."

"Why not?"

"Three years ago she married a pansy. I don't blame her for that. It's an even risk nowadays for any girl with a bit of money. But I do blame her for having such a resounding divorce. I do blame her for that. Anyway, she went to the depths of the country a year ago, and now lives entirely surrounded by hounds. So you won't see much of her. But you'll see plenty of my youngest brother—Rupert, the rat."

"Why—the rat?"

"That comes later. I'm only giving you the chief facts. You'll soon be able to fill in the gaps. But remember this: till Christopher turns up, you will be his representative. That fact will bring the Mannerings and the Teasdales buzzing round you like bees. Christopher is fabulously rich—fabulously! And every Mannering and every Teasdale is running a financial crisis to-day. So they'll be interested in you."

"It sounds exciting. I shall keep a journal, Mannering. I'll start

it to-night. And now don't you think it's about time you told me something about Christopher?"

"That's not so easy."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a legend."

"A—legend?"

"Just that."

Then Mannering added:

"He is, and he always was, an enigma."

"But——"

"Wait! I'll have to think."

He stretched gracefully, then looked lazily round the Square, in order to convince himself that he wasn't missing anything.

"Here are some facts to go on with," he said at last. "Christopher was thirteen when Alastair and Viola died. None of us had seen him, as he had always lived abroad. And we scarcely saw him after his parents died—because Alastair's will had some odd instructions about Christopher's education. He was educated by a succession of tutors and, quite often, we did not know where he was."

Then, seeing I was about to ask a question, Mannering stopped me with a movement of his hand.

"Better just listen, Drake. You must understand that no one cared tuppence about Christopher—then. He represented Viola's great crime. And her great crime was her total break with tradition. The Manneringswere quite right to resent that—because the Manner-ings depend entirely on tradition."

"Do you mean they've done pretty well out of it?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Till recently, they did devilish well. The present head of the family is Sir Michael Mannering—and he's the tenth baronet. So the Manneringshave been doing very well out of tradition for about three hundred years."

"Let's get back to Christopher. He's the one who interests me. Surely the Manneringsknew he had been left a lot of money by Alastair Bell?"

"Of course they knew. But they saw no chance of getting it—and they weren't so hard up in those days as they are now. Anyway, when Christopher turned up—when he was about nineteen—he was much too much for the Manneringss."

"In what way?"

"In every way, my dear fellow. He was too damned brilliant, for one thing. He was one of those rare people who could have had a great career in any one of a dozen activities. He was an incalculable being."

"But in what way—exactly?"

"In every way. Imagine yourself in his place. He was then about nineteen. He looked like a god on holiday—he had plenty of money—and a first-rate intellect. All sorts of glittering prizes were within reach of his hand. Well, he just did not bother about any of all that. He seemed possessed by a passion for experience. He had the gift of packing a lifetime into six months. He had lived a dozen lives before he was twenty. I've never met any one in the least like him—and I hope to God I never do again. He might have been someone from a different race."

After a pause, Mannering went on:

"I can only give you the baldest outline, Drake, or we'll be here all day. When he was twenty-eight, Christopher had done everything you can imagine—and done it pretty thoroughly. He never touched the money he had inherited. If he wanted money, he made it. Now, give me a cigarette, will you? We've reached the climax."

I gave him a cigarette and a moment later he said slowly:

"Just before he was twenty-eight, Christopher became queer."

"Queer in what way?"

"In every way. In the first place, he lost his memory. He did not know any of us—and he did not remember a thing about the past. He became very eccentric. He didn't seem to know what to do next. It's not easy to explain. He went on as if this world had ceased to exist for him—as if he were aware of another world quite different from this one. Anyway, eventually—at his own request—he was certified."

"At his own request?"

"Yes. And he went to Beulah Island."

"You don't mean that mental colony, run by Dr. Fordyce!" I exclaimed. "That island off the Welsh coast?"

"You've heard about it, then?" Mannering asked, evidently somewhat surprised.

"I've read several articles about it in American magazines. It's run on entirely new lines, isn't it?"

"Entirely. And the man who runs it—Dr. Fordyce—was a friend of Christopher's before Chris went queer. Which is rather odd. But everything about Christopher is rather odd. Still, this is the real point."

Mannering leaned over the table, then said:

"Get *this* into your head, Drake, whatever you do. Directly Christopher was certified, his money affairs were put into the hands of the Master in Lunacy—or whoever it is. It was then the family discovered the extent of Christopher's wealth."

Mannering laughed, then went on:

"It was amazing—the grandest comedy you can imagine. Christopher hadn't touched the money he had inherited—and Alastair Bell must have been a wizard. He had instructed his executors to leave the money where he had invested it—and it had flourished like fifty bay trees. The family suddenly discovered that Christopher was fabulously rich."

"You mean—literally—fabulously?"

"Literally. God only knows what he is worth. Well, here he was insane! Also, for some reason, the family thought he was going to die—soon after he went to Beulah Island. They worked out the next-of-kin situation to a split farthing. Harold Teasdale, who is the family lawyer and a financial expert—gave weeks and weeks to it. You'll meet Harold Teasdale. That's certain."

"And, now, Christopher has been certified sane and——"

"And the family is in a ferment," Mannering cut in. "He's master of his money again. As the Mannerings are quite certain he's still mad, they are terrified he'll give the money away, or go in for good works. You can see the tragic possibilities of the situation. It often makes me shudder when I wake in the night. Anyway, you'll soon be in the thick of it."

There was a long silence, then I said:

"You weren't serious when you suggested that Christopher had foreseen that you would run into me? You couldn't have been serious."

"More or less. You wait till you meet him. He's either God or the Devil—or both. But I'll leave you to make your own discoveries. And now you are going to lunch with me at Carton's. After lunch, I'll telephone London—and write to the Bank to fix you up. And, to-night, we'll do something amusing. I shan't be in Paris again for a year."

He beckoned the waiter, paid the bill, then turned to me and said:

"Let's stroll round before we go. I love the Place du Tertre."

"Good! And while we stroll round you can tell me two things. And the first is: why are you going to America?"

He looked at me with an enigmatic expression for some moments, then said:

"Because things are desperate with me, my dear fellow. For years I've lived on influence jobs and stray legacies. Both have come to an end. Till a year ago, I counted on Uncle George. He was over seventy, a bachelor, and very rich. But the Mannering sensuality beat me."

"The Mannering——"

"Sensuality!" he cut in with great emphasis. "Sexuality is really the right word. Uncle George not only married a young girl of twenty, but he had a child by her. Exit Arthur! So I'm off to America. I've a lot of friends there. *And* there's a girl there, also about twenty—note that!—who is very rich and who imagines she's in love with me."

"And you may propose to her?"

He took my arm and we began to stroll round the Square.

"As you say, Drake, I may propose to her. And I'm afraid of doing that."

"Why?"

"One must have some illusions about oneself in order to be mentally comfortable. And I'm very keen on mental comfort. Well, if I marry this child, I shall *know* that the desire for easy living is the deepest thing in me. I suspect it now—but I shall know it then. Also, I'll be haunted by the fact that the Mannering sexuality has emerged in me before it's due. After seventy is the traditional time for its emergence. It usually comes with the gout—and goes only with death."

Suddenly he stopped and exclaimed:

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Drake! I shall be back in Paris next May. We'll meet at that table we've just left—to-day year."

"That's a date. I'll be there in May 1939."

"So will I, Drake. I know I'll be back here next May. We'll meet at that table and compare notes to-day year."

"Good enough. And here's my second question. Why did you call your youngest brother, Rupert, a rat?"

"Because he is one. You'll see. And you'll see soon. I'll telephone him—give him a description of you—and I'll bet he'll be at Victoria Station to-morrow to meet you."

"That doesn't tell me why he is a rat."

"He's an intellectual, who has suddenly seen the Light. That's very common nowadays, of course. Nevertheless, Rupert is still an expert legacy hunter. He's got the whole family taped. He's worked out their expectation of life to a split second. But that doesn't stop him giving lectures on Spiritual Life to little groups of The Elect all over the country."

"He's pretty clever, then?"

"Of course he is! All rotten people are clever. Rupert is, what he always was, a rat! A rat of rats, my dear fellow, a super-rat!"

Mannering laughed, then went on:

"I'll give you a forwarding address in New York. Don't bother to write at length. Just send me the more amusing facts."

"All right. It will be odd to be in London. I haven't been there for about seven years."

"You'll notice plenty of changes. You still hear English spoken in some districts. But not many."

"It's like that already, is it? Well, it won't worry me. I shall go to Christopher's house in Meridian Square—and wait till he turns up."

"That's the programme, Drake. And, till he turns up, you won't lack visitors. Let's walk round the Square again, then we'll get a taxi to Carton's. I wish that woman would come back."

"Which one?"

"The autumnal one, of course! She had something unique. It's difficult to say what it was, but she'd got it."

Nevertheless, as we strolled round the Square for the second time, Mannering gave several definitions of the lady's unique quality—several most penetrating definitions.

Then he hailed a taxi, and told the driver to take us to Carton's.

CHAPTER II

Channel Crossing

THE next day I left for London.

The Calais-Dover boat was crowded but I managed to get a deck-chair—and spent some time studying my fellow-passengers. I was returning to England at last.

Everything quivered in dazzling sunshine. The blue masterpiece of the sky glowed above a diamond-glittering sea. Not a breath stirred. Far overhead a gull hung motionless, like an entranced thought.

But I had too much to think about to be lulled by the spellbound immobility of sky and sea. Till now, I had had little time to review the very peculiar circumstances in which I had been engaged as companion to Christopher Bell. But now I had time—with the result that I made a number of discoveries.

The first was that you do not get ten pounds a week for nothing, unless you have a private income of five hundred a year. Why was I being paid so generously? Because the job involved danger of some kind? Presumably. Mannering had asked whether I minded a certain amount of risk, but it was important to remember that Mannering was not paying my salary. Christopher was paying it. It was understandable that Mannering should think I was incurring a risk by becoming companion to a man who had been in a mental home for two years, but it was unlikely that Christopher shared that opinion. I could only assume, therefore, that Christopher had private reasons for generosity.

The second discovery I made, as I sat in my deck-chair under the cloudless sky, was that it would be wise to wait till events confirmed Mannering's story before accepting it. Probably his story was accurate enough in essentials but, almost certainly, he had secret motives for wanting me to be Christopher's companion. Also, and above all, it was necessary to remember that I knew practically nothing about Arthur Mannering. I might be walking into a trap of an unimaginable nature. By all the evidence, it seemed extremely probable.

When I reached this stage in my speculations, I happened to look at my fellow-passengers—most of whom were reading newspapers with expressions of weary apathy. I knew well enough that if I were to tell any one of them the circumstances in which I was returning to England, he would regard those circumstances as fantastic.

But that did not impress me in the least, because I also knew that the newspapers which these people were reading so apathetically contained news on every other page which was twice as fantastic as the circumstances in which I had been engaged as Christopher's companion. I knew, too, that if these people had not seen a newspaper for five years, and had then been suddenly confronted with the ones they were now reading in May 1938, they would have thought those papers recorded the events of an asylum world. They read them apathetically only because, day after day, month after month, they had become imperceptibly inured to nightmare news.

I realised clearly enough that it was odd to be engaged as companion to a man I had never seen—by a man whom I scarcely knew. But the " odd " does not surprise me, because I have always found life on this spinning planet a somewhat odd affair. Surely any one who has leisure, who has been a spectator, and who has wandered behind the scenes, is not particularly surprised by anything that happens to him or to any one else. But, I admit, leisure is necessary in order to be a spectator and to wander behind the scenes. And most people have little or no leisure. They live on a treadmill—and fall off it into a grave. And what—will you tell me?—could be more " odd " than that?

As to the element of risk, I did not give it a thought. One's actions are usually judged on the background of their alternative. If I had not accepted Arthur Mannering's offer, I should probably have starved. That was the alternative—and, compared with it, any other risk seemed negligible.

To me, as I sat on that deck-chair crossing the Channel, the most remarkable aspect of the whole adventure was not that I had been engaged as companion to the unknown Christopher—but that he was Viola Teasdale's son. *That* certainly did seem remarkable, because her beauty had been the most overwhelming experience of my childhood. I could see, clearly, every detail of the squalid room in which I had found the newspaper containing her photograph. Again, I felt the tumultuous onset of conflicting emotions which had stormed my being at the sudden discovery that such beauty walked the world.

It did not surprise me that, in Mannering's phrase, she had thrown the family completely " out of gear." Nor did it surprise me to learn that she had outraged convention and ignored tradition—that she had deserted every one and everything as a result of her love for Alastair Bell. Did they imagine that beauty like hers—beauty that " made you gasp "—would create no stir in the world? Yes, they

probably thought that. People like the Mannerings usually expect a volcano to behave like a night-light.

The sudden roar of a plane overhead made me aware of my surroundings. I glanced at my companions, most of whom were still reading their newspapers, but I noticed that one of them, who had made up his mind at Calais to be sea-sick—although the sea was level as a billiard table—had just succeeded, to his evident satisfaction.

A few minutes later we entered Dover harbour.

CHAPTER III

I Meet a Genius

I

As I emerged into the station yard at Victoria, I was greeted in the pleasantest manner imaginable.

The authorities had evidently chosen this moment to test the efficiency of every air-raid siren in London—with the result that a multiple wailing suddenly smote the air, as if all the manholes of hell had been removed simultaneously. This infernal chorus rose to a crescendo of agony, then slowly subsided to a thin whine of terror.

I was wondering whether this welcome home had any symbolic significance, when I heard a high-pitched and rather pedantic voice say:

"You, I believe, are Vincent Drake."

I turned to discover a remarkable-looking young man. He was tall, thin, and very precise in appearance. He had no hat and every now and again his fair, rather long, and somewhat lifeless hair fluttered in the breeze. What chiefly struck me, however, was the very intelligent light-blue eyes which were regarding me with icy detachment.

I imagine I looked somewhat surprised, for he suddenly announced:

"Rupert Mannering! Rupert Mannering!"

The irritability with which he disclosed his identity plainly showed how deeply he resented the necessity for doing so. Evidently Rupert Mannering wanted to be instantly recognized by every one. This fact seemed to have certain implications but I had no time to unravel them, for Rupert suddenly pointed to a very smart two-seater, then said:

"Get in—get in!"

So I got in—and began to tell him about my meeting with Arthur Mannering in the Place du Tertre, when he interrupted by saying that his brother had telephoned and had told him "all that." Rupert's tone indicated that he did not believe one word of Arthur's story.

Suddenly he asked:

"Did that ridiculous brother of mine mention Belinda?"

"Belinda?"

"So he didn't. That's all right. I only wanted to know."

It was evident that he was inwardly furious at having asked about Belinda, but, a moment later, he began to put on his gloves in the cool, efficient manner which characterized the least of his actions. Incidentally, his ankles and slender hands might have been envied by a pretty girl.

I imagined he was going to take me to Meridian Square, but, soon after we started, I became so fascinated by Rupert's method of driving that I no longer thought about where we were going.

At first his driving technique seemed somewhat complicated, but I soon discovered it was based on the simple formula of reaching the destination in the shortest time imaginable.

The methods of attaining this end were exhilarating. If a pedestrian got in his way, Rupert shot the car dead at him. If it were necessary to assume that a bus or car would swerve, if Rupert cut in, Rupert made that assumption—and acted on it. When he approached favourable traffic lights, he invariably accelerated—with the result that we usually darted through against the prohibitory red.

Naturally, these methods were not unobserved by others. Shouts and curses followed us, like the rumbling of distant thunder after lightning.

I glanced at him. There he sat—his hands lightly on the wheel—his implacable eyes intent on opportunities for new exploits. His eyes, and the thin straight line of the mouth, contradicted very effectively the impression of immaturity created by his rather bird-like features and the extraordinarily narrow pointed chin.

As I looked at him, I seemed to hear Arthur Mannering say:

"Rupert is, what he always was, a rat! A rat of rats, my dear fellow, a super-rat."

But at this point even Rupert had to stop for a red light. The result was that a large lorry which had nearly overturned a hundred yards back—owing to one of Rupert's more audacious exploits—now drew level with us.

An enormous purple-faced driver leaned ponderously down from his perch and hissed:

"You think you're the only person on the road, don't yer?"

"I'm quite certain of it, my good man," Rupert replied icily. "I'm one of the very few *persons* in the world."

The yellow light gleamed—and Rupert shot forward like a meteor.

Some minutes later I made the obvious discovery that we were not on our way to Meridian Square.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Highgate."

"Why?"

"Because, temporarily, I happen to live at—*Highgate.*"

His emphasis, and the complicated wriggle that accompanied it, clearly showed how Rupert's pride rebelled against the indignity of residing at Highgate.

"It's purely temporary," he added rapidly. "Purely temporary!"

Then, having made an old man leap like a ballet dancer, in order to avoid instant death, and having dodged a hearse by a tenth of an inch, Rupert flashed round a corner—streaked up a hill—then stopped outside a green-and-white little house, which peered demurely at the world from its prim seclusion.

There was a sentimental flower garden on either side of the narrow covered way, leading to the front door. Birds were twittering: wallflowers shed a warm fragrance from the top of the ancient wall which half-hid the house from the road.

Rupert seemed about as appropriate on this background as an Eskimo at a church bazaar. And this impression deepened as I followed him through a small square hall, full of knick-knacks, then up a period staircase which creaked resentfully at every step. An atmosphere of lavender and old lace pervaded everything.

We entered a long, low room, on the first floor, overlooking a pretty garden at the back of the house. But although numerous bookcases—a businesslike-looking desk—and ultra-modern furniture proclaimed this to be Rupert's study, I did not feel that he had impressed his personality on the room. It seemed full of ghosts—ghosts who confidently awaited the return of the old régime.

Seeing that I was looking round with some curiosity, Rupert exclaimed:

"Sit down—sit down! Ignore all this. It represents a temporary solution of the economic problem. That's all."

Probably I looked surprised, because he went on, more irritably:

"My good man, this is the position. I had a rich Uncle George, over seventy, who always said he was leaving his money to me—and to that grotesque brother of mine, Arthur. The said Uncle George then married a young girl, who instantly produced a bouncing baby, weighing fourteen pounds at birth. I suppose you'll agree that created an economic problem?"

"Yes, I suppose it did."

"Of course it did! *I* dealt with it immediately. The fatuous Arthur is dealing with it now. That's why he's going to America. Where he intends to cash-in on his celebrated charm."

"I think you dealt with the economic problem very successfully," I said, looking round.

"At considerable personal sacrifice," Rupert exclaimed petulantly.

"What happened was this. I discovered a highly anæmic, extremely plain, and vastly sentimental cousin—called Belinda. I must explain that in our family one is always discovering cousins as there are whole armies of them. Belinda had a few hundreds a year—and this revolting house. She was about fifty, and she was also about to fall in love with the Vicar. Needless to say, she confused this sexual infatuation with a Vision From On High. You know the type?"

I said I had heard of such cases.

"Quite. Well, I educated her. I psycho-analysed the bewildered virgin. I made her regard herself objectively. Eventually, I convinced her that she was an entirely fatuous person, wholly incapable of running her own affairs."

"So this house is hers?"

"It *was* hers. It's mine now. Also, I reinvested her money—in my name—in Canadian securities. Obviously the thing to do—as Europe is finished. This annoyed Harold Teasdale, the family lawyer, as all Belinda's affairs were in his hands. But I still let Belinda live here. And I make her an adequate allowance. She's very grateful, and she tries not to disturb me."

Rupert was leaning against the mantelpiece. His whole attitude implied that he had been absurdly generous—that he had made a very bad bargain—but that he intended to abide by it for the time being.

"Still, as I say," he went on in the same high-pitched, detached tone, "it's a purely temporary arrangement. I frequently tell Belinda that I can't bind myself indefinitely. I've much more important things to do."

"Does she realize that?"

"Oh yes, I think so. She gets nervous at times and once—would you believe it?—she asked what would happen to her if I left her. But I don't think, somehow, she'll ask again."

The tone in which he said the last sentence made me feel very sorry for Belinda.

I now knew that one reason why Rupert had waylaid me on my arrival was to give me his version of his dealings with Belinda, knowing that I should hear a less favourable one from others. But he had subtler reasons, and I wanted to discover them. I imagined this would not be difficult if I encouraged him to talk about himself.

"You said just now," I began, "that Europe is finished. Not a very original statement, perhaps, but——"

"On the contrary, my good man," he cut in with immense patronage. "A very definitely original statement—in the sense in which *I* made it."

It is necessary to point out that when Rupert used the words "I," "me," and "mine" he invariably emphasized them. I am not going to indicate this in each instance because it would be tiresome, but it is important to remember it. It is also necessary to know that directly the conversation ceased to be concerned with Rupert or his ideas, he began to writhe like an angry snake.

"In what sense, then, do *you* mean that Europe is finished?"

Rupert scrutinized me intently for some moments, as if trying to decide whether it was worth while to shed light on such darkness, then he leaned more heavily against the mantelpiece—and announced that he was a genius of an entirely new type.

His theory was a remarkable one. Briefly, it was to the effect that the great geniuses of the past—Shakespeare, Beethoven, Rembrandt—were not, strictly speaking, geniuses at all. They had not possessed genius. It had possessed them. In themselves, they were wretched creatures—helpless in the grip of an octopus-like gift. *That* wasn't genius! It was psychic cancer. Whereas he, Rupert, had genius. He controlled it. It did not control him. He, Rupert, was the first of an entirely new order of genius.

I said it was an interesting theory.

"It's not a theory at all!" he exclaimed. "It's a fact."

Then he began to give me his views of the European situation.

Arthur Mannering had told me that Rupert lectured to little groups of The Elect, and I had no difficulty in believing it, because his present attitude suggested that he was addressing a large, though invisible, audience.

He began by defining Civilization as a gesture in the jungle. A gesture maintained for a few brief centuries. Then the vitality necessary to maintain it slowly ebbs—and the jungle closes in.

"And the jungle has begun to close in—in Europe?" I asked.

"Obviously. How much more evidence do you want?"

"It's the evidence which you regard as conclusive that would interest me."

"Quite—quite!" he said graciously. "Well, here are two main facts. Europe no longer produces *minds*—she only produces *brains*. And she has long ceased to produce great art. And she will never produce it again."

Then, seeing that I was about to make a comment, he waved me into silence.

"My good man!" he exclaimed emphatically, "if the works of these modern gentry, who call themselves artists, do not convince you that Europe is no longer capable of producing great art, you had better meet those gentry in the flesh."

"You think that would convince me?"

"Surely," he replied. "Modern *artists* are just a gang of charlatans, propagandists, entertainers, and psychic invalids. Anyway, surely it's pathetically obvious that art, music, drama, and literature have ceased to be spiritual necessities to modern people. All they want is entertainment."

Almost immediately he went on:

"Europe literally creaks with every symptom of old age. And the chief is that she is only capable of recognizing *economic* problems."

"There's something in that," I said slowly. "All the solutions proposed for Europe's ills sound pretty futile to me. Every one seems to think you can alter hell by rearranging the furniture."

Rupert crossed to his desk, scribbled a note on his blotting-pad, then returned to the fireplace—and continued his address to the invisible audience.

According to him, modern society was divided into two classes: Nit-wits—and The Elect. The Nit-wits believed that Europe had a future. And The Elect knew she was a graveyard.

"And if you are one of The Elect," I asked, "just what do you do?"

"You preserve yourself, of course. You isolate yourself from the madhouse. The Elect are the nucleus of a new race. The Elect know that Europe is going to be destroyed by revolution. Or she will collapse through old age. She may even be destroyed by war."

"You seem to think that very unlikely."

"My dear good man, if there is a war, it will be only because it starts itself. The leaders in every country are terrified of war because they know it will be the end of them."

"But what about these huge armament programmes?" I asked.

"If it were not for those huge armament programmes, the upper classes in every country would have become Depressed Areas long ago. Which would have been just too bad. Incidentally, armaments are—and they will remain—the sole surviving industry in Europe. Also, there is Free Trade only in armaments—a fact which should rejoice the Liberals."

Rupert paused—in the manner of an expert lecturer, who wished his audience to assimilate these ideas before presenting them with new ones. He evidently realized the necessity of not overtaxing the receptive capacity of his listeners.

At last, he said:

"What has happened is really extremely simple. Some years ago, European politicians became mad with jealousy of film stars. They became so jealous that they decided to behave like them. Now, of

course, the politicians are beating Hollywood at its own game. And so are their wives—which is much worse. Nothing is so depressing as a barrel trying to look like a dangerous blonde."

Rupert paused, writhed gracefully, then went on:

"No, no, my good man! What every one is afraid of to-day is Disarmament. Not war, Disarmament. Especially the politicians. And quite right too, from their point of view."

"Why?"

"Because, my good innocent, disarmament will mean vast mobs of unemployed—and the emergence of the real problem."

"And what is the real problem?"

"The real problem, my toddling infant, is—The Machine. The Machine, which brought this European mob into existence. The Machine, which has already destroyed that mob—spiritually. And which will eventually destroy it—physically."

Rupert made a rhythmical movement with his elegant hands.

"All this, you know, really is absurdly obvious to any one who knows that you can't make the world safe for nit-wits."

"Which is the democratic ideal?"

"Clearly! Look at the leaders of democracy. Nit-wits—on stilts."

"You may be right," I said, after a pause, "I don't know. All I do know is that there is a strong whiff of corruption everywhere. I don't know what causes it—and I don't think the cause matters a lot. You do not need to know the origin of a stink in order to smell it."

Again Rupert crossed to his desk, scribbled something on his blotting-pad, then sipped some water in the manner of a professional lecturer.

Eventually he returned to the mantelpiece.

But, before he could continue his address, I said:

"All this is very interesting, of course, but what I really want to know is some details about my job. After all, I was engaged as companion in rather——"

"We'll go into that later. I shall have a good deal to say about my fantastic family—but it can wait. Now, where was I?"

I had realized, of course, long ago, that Rupert was staging this performance to impress me. To impress me—only because I was going to be Christopher's companion. Evidently he hoped to derive some advantage from dazzling me with his brilliance, but what that advantage could possibly be I was unable to guess.

Still, I found Rupert's lecture quite interesting in its way. It was entirely negative and wholly critical, but that did not make it valueless—although I knew, of course, that criticism of others is usually inverted self-praise.

Evidently Rupert had decided that I had not surrendered wholly to his spell, because he decided to go on with his address.

"I suppose you realize," he said patronizingly, "that the most bewildered tribe in the European jungle to-day is the English?"

"What makes you think that the English are so bewildered?"

"The facts make me think so. They know that conscription is coming—and that has shaken them quite a lot. It's made them realize that they will have to surrender their famous liberties, one by one, in order to defend them."

Then he added:

"However, they'll do what they always do do. They will surrender those liberties, and continue to believe that they still possess them."

"That won't be easy, will it?" I asked, eager for information.

"Perfectly easy. The English have a genius for self-deception—which foreigners think is hypocrisy."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference, my good man, is that self-deception is an unconscious process—and hypocrisy is a conscious one."

"You're probably right there."

"I'm usually right," Rupert announced airily. "The best joke—in this month and year of grace, May 1938—is the policy of the present Government. Which is, of course, an entirely hard-boiled affair—but it has to be represented to the sentimental British public as the purest idealism. That's not easy. It's rather like trying to describe a bull-fight as if it were a game of croquet with the curate."

Rupert crossed to the desk, took another sip of water, then returned to the mantelpiece.

"Oh no," he went on, "the English are very disturbed. All of them, except Cabinet Ministers—whose self-complacency rests as inappropriately on their achievements as a crown on the skull of a corpse."

He allowed me a few moments in which to appreciate all the implications of that statement, then swept to his final theme.

"But the really important fact is that the great middle classes are getting restive. That's an ominous sign."

"And why, do you think, are they growing restive?"

"Because, my good man, they are slowly slipping into that morass of insecurity which was formerly reserved for the lower orders. So, before long, they will cease to be flunkeys. They will cease to be flunkeys when they discover that you can't eat snobbery."

But, by now, I was determined to get to the Mannerings. I wanted to find out something about the background of my job.

"All very interesting, but it's time we discussed practical affairs."

"Quite. You glance at this, while I put through some important telephone calls."

Rupert handed me something which looked like a large map. I unrolled it, then crossed to a table in order to study it.

II

The "map" was a genealogical tree of the Mannering and Teasdale families—and I had never seen anything in the least like it. The precision of its arrangement, the perfection of Rupert's printing, were remarkable enough, but it was the extent of the two families—and their inter-relationship—which surprised me.

Arthur Mannering had told me in the Place du Tertre that his father and mother had been the youngest of their respective—and very numerous—families. Consequently he had hosts of uncles and aunts, and armies of cousins. But it was one thing to be told this and quite another to see actual names, dates of births, marriages, deaths, and so on. I soon realized that, collectively, the Mannerings and the Teasdales must be a powerful clan.

What chiefly interested me in this genealogical tree, however, was Rupert's motive in drawing it with such precision. It is true that Arthur Mannering had said that Rupert was an expert legacy hunter—though I had not taken the remark very seriously—but, now, having met Rupert, and having learned of his dealings with Belinda, it did seem probable that his interest in his relatives was not derived wholly from pride of race.

"Better hang that thing on the wall, if you want to study it," Rupert announced suddenly. "You'll find some drawing-pins in that drawer."

I fastened the "tree" to the wall—while Rupert put through his sixth telephone call.

A few minutes later he crossed to me and said:

"I don't suppose you'll meet all those people—but——"

"God! I hope not!" I exclaimed.

"But most of them will turn up," he went on, as if I had not spoken. "Every one of them hopes to get something out of that lunatic Christopher. In fact, one way and another, all of them regard Christopher as the future."

Then he added:

"Bar myself, all the Mannerings are money mad. Especially that bonehead brother of mine—Arthur. It's very obvious why he gave you the job of companion."

"It isn't to me," I said with some emphasis.

"Really?"

His tone implied that I was stupid to lie to someone who knew the truth, but, if it amused me to do so, it didn't worry him.

"No, they won't all turn up," he continued, still looking at the chart. "For instance, I don't suppose you'll see Jack the Raper."

"Jack the——?"

"Raper. An old uncle of mine—a Major—whose speciality is very young girls. He was arrested recently for certain exploits on Popplestone Common. But Lady Boggs immediately got her very considerable influence to work—with the result that Jack the Raper was acquitted with colours flying. A local paper came out with a huge headline: MAJOR'S HONOUR VINDICATED. Which wasn't bad going for Lady Boggs—especially as the Major had been picked out in a flash, by all the very youthful virgins involved, at the Identification Parade."

A pause—during which Rupert scanned the family tree in the manner of a collector seeking rare specimens for exhibition.

"You won't see the Bishop," he said regretfully, "because the Bishop sees no one."

"No one!"

"No one," he repeated.

"How's that?"

"Because the Bishop's sole ambition is to make some pronouncement, on public affairs, which will get a headline in the newspapers. As he has no imagination whatever—which is one reason why he went into the Church, and another why he became a Bishop—he suffers the torments of the damned trying to think of something sensational to say, Often he flings himself on the floor of his study and howls in desperation. So much so that The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have called twice."

"You're not serious, of course?"

"Perfectly serious. The Bishop's last effort wasn't too bad. He announced that: 'Stalin Isn't a Bad Fellow.' *The Times* referred to this discovery in a leading article—and the Bishop received hundreds of abusive letters, which he adores."

Rupert surveyed the "tree" meditatively for some minutes, then said slowly:

"You *may* see Aunt Agatha—but I doubt it."

"And what does Aunt Agatha do?" I asked anxiously.

"Aunt Agatha is a very advanced spiritualist. She has daily conversations with St. Paul—through a mad-looking medium called Bella.

But I regret to have to inform you that St. Paul's literary style is not what it was. Not by a long way."

Rupert gazed affectionately at the "tree," then added:

"You certainly will not see Uncle Mike."

"Why not?"

"Because he's in prison for forgery. Pity! Quite an artist in his way—and a man of real initiative. The Empire-building type. But he came too late to an Empire too old."

I expressed regret that I should not meet Uncle Mike, adding that it had been an ambition of mine from early youth to meet a forger. I ascribed this to seeing a play called *Jim the Penman* when I was a child.

Rupert entirely ignored these reminiscences. Then he announced:

"Uncle Phillip has gone to Canada. That's a pity too. He's worth meeting."

I said I was sure of it, then asked the nature of his activities.

"He's a successful business man. Which is another way of saying that he is in armaments."

Rupert turned, fixed me with his glacial eyes, then asked:

"Have you noticed that all successful men have one thing in common?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh, surely! Their manner always suggests that there cannot be anything fundamentally wrong with a world in which *they* have come to the top. You must have noticed it. Uncle Phillip is typical. Always optimistic! Always shouting there is going to be a boom! Always yelling that conditions everywhere are all right. There is subtle joy in listening to him. It is amusing to hear the symptom praising the disease."

Again Rupert glanced at the "tree."

"You *may* meet Lady Nox—but it is far from certain."

"And what does Lady Nox do?" I asked.

"She's one of these air-raid fiends. You know how these silly, horse-faced, upper-class women revel in authority over others? Lady Nox is air raid mad. I called on her yesterday—and found her in a gas mask. I can't tell you how it improved her. It gave her that touch of individuality which she has always lacked.

"Then there is Uncle Ned," Rupert went on. "Yes, Uncle Ned—so helpful during the weekly international crisis. He's all for dignity—for keeping calm—and being British. He wants you to play bowls with the enemy in sight. I told him that if you played bowls with the enemy in sight nowadays, you'd pick up a bowl—and find it was a bomb."

Rupert next proceeded to give a general survey of his relatives, which not only revealed the widespread activities of the Mannerings, but also indicated the exalted standards of that distinguished family. I soon discovered the necessity for a drastic revision of money values. In the Mannering world, someone with an income of five hundred "hadn't a bob." Someone else, who was "existing on a pittance," turned out to have a thousand a year. Any one who worked for a small income, and lived on it, was "starving."

Nevertheless, I gathered that, by Mannering standards, times were bad—and were likely to become worse. Many stately homes had been abandoned and their former occupants were "pigging it" in luxury flats. Spacious and splendid estates had vanished long ago.

"Old George was pretty shrewd. He had a lovely estate in Buckinghamshire. He married the rich daughter of the local jerry builder, then sold his estate to her father—who is known to the public as 'Bilk—the Bungalow King.' Old George made a fortune. He is now President of the National Institution for the Preservation of Rural Beauty."

After a pause, Rupert went on:

"But do not imagine that there are not plenty of wasters and wrong 'uns in the family. There are several. Many a Mannering has made his mark in the underworld. Nowadays, of course, most of my cousins are in the Air Force. There's a boom in Youth—as most people think war is coming. The Air Force is the best job going—if you're young and of the bulldog breed."

"It takes courage," I pointed out.

"Oh, my dear good man, *that* type of courage is common enough. Every animal has it. Even rats have it."

"All of them?"

"I imagine so."

I looked at my watch, then rose. Although I knew that Rupert's account of the Mannerings was a distorted one, it gave me some idea of the general situation.

I could see he was annoyed by my rising, but I ignored this and said:

"I shan't go to Meridian Square to-night. I shall go to an hotel. Have you any idea when Christopher will turn up?"

"No, I have *not*," he replied, writhing with irritation. "No one could prophesy about the actions of that lunatic."

"You seem very certain he's still mad."

"He's never been anything else. The kind of so-called brilliance he once had was only another aspect of madness All this absurd

excitement about him is contemptible. He's a nobody—and he always was one."

He spoke with such icy hatred that I stared at him—greatly to his irritation.

At last I said with some emphasis:

"I'm going to assume he's sane. Legally, he's sane and, anyway, he's done me a very good turn."

"I don't doubt it," he said offensively. So offensively that I knew he realized he had failed to impress me.

Then he added:

"Did my moron brother, Arthur, make it clear that if Christopher attemps to murder you—which he probably will—the Mannering family can accept no responsibility of any kind?"

"No, he did not," I replied. "And there was no need for him to do so. Christopher Bell is employing me. The Mannerings have nothing to do with it. I'm expecting nothing from them—and shall ask nothing of them."

"You'll change your mind when you meet Christopher."

"If I do, I'll let you know. We may not meet again till that happens."

Rupert stared at me with an expression verging on consternation.

"But—but we shall have to consult."

"Why? I tell you, again, the Mannerings aren't my employers. You don't have to worry. If Christopher tries to murder me, I shan't claim compensation from your family. And, anyway, I've nothing to lose whatever happens."

We went downstairs together.

Just as we reached the hall, a wraith-like figure emerged from a room on our left, but, on seeing Rupert, it stood as if petrified till he had passed. I imagined this was Belinda. Rupert entirely ignored her—and made no reference to her.

"Did you say you were going to Meridian Square to-morrow?"

"Yes," I replied. "Why?"

"Then you'll probably run into Godfrey Bristowe."

"Do you mean the artist?"

"Oh yes, yes! He paints water colours—and has all sorts of other puerile parlour tricks. He's a preposterous person. He married a Teasdale, but has been a widower for years. He's flung away a fortune, and is quite crazy. He's decorated that ridiculous house in Meridian Square—so you'll probably see him."

"I'll be glad to. I admire his work."

"His *work*!" The emphasis was withering.

It had occurred to me that, as Rupert had brought me to Highgate,

and had taken up a good deal of my time, it was now his intention to drive me to an hotel.

I was interested therefore when he began to remove my battered suitcase from his smart two-seater. He did this with great care in order to avoid the slightest risk of scratching the woodwork. Then, having dropped the suitcase on the pavement, he got into the car and said:

"You'll pick up a taxi easily enough. I have to go now."

Ten seconds later he was at the bottom of the hill.

While I waited for a stray taxi to appear, I decided that I had probably made an enemy.

CHAPTER IV

Meridian Square

I

BEFORE giving an account of the extraordinary events which occurred during my stay at Meridian Square, it is necessary to emphasize certain facts in order to make frequent reference to them unnecessary.

The first is that every page of this book is derived from a journal. I started that journal in Paris—immediately after my meeting with Arthur Mannering in the Place du Tertre—and continued it during the whole of my engagement as Christopher's companion. It is by my side now, and I have only to open it, anywhere, to be instantly reminded of a strange meeting, or an odd conversation, in that house in Meridian Square. To turn the leaves of this journal is to watch a procession of men and women whom I shall never see again. And it contains pages which I still cannot read without experiencing ghostly premonitions.

It is essential, however, to make clear that the events narrated in this book are not a twentieth of those which actually occurred during the months I spent at Meridian Square. And it contains few references to the letters I received from all sorts of people. Sometimes I felt that not only the Mannerings and the Teasdales—though heaven knows they were numerous enough—but that every one who had ever heard of Christopher Bell expected extraordinary benefits from his sudden and strange return to the world. So, although this book deals chiefly with the " out-of-gear " Mannerings, it is essential to emphasize that I was involved with all sorts of other people during the relevant period. Above all, I was concerned with a subtle change in myself, of which I became dimly aware on the day of my arrival at Meridian Square.

And now it is necessary to explain, on broad lines, the reactions of the Mannering and Teasdale families to my engagement as Christopher's companion.

In the first place, most of them did not believe that I had not met Christopher. They did not assert this but their attitude implied it. Many of them were convinced that a secret relationship existed between Christopher and myself. Even Harold Teasdale, the lawyer, thought this. They regarded me as Christopher's ambassador and imagined therefore that I had influence over him.

It is generally believed that people have a definite opinion on any given subject, but I have not found this to be so. On the contrary, I find that most people hold several opinions simultaneously, and, frequently, quite contradictory ones. The Mannerings certainly did on the question of Christopher.

For instance, they were convinced he was still mad, and they regarded the manner of my engagement as additional proof of his insanity. But they also believed that this engagement masked a secret relationship between us. Also, although the Mannerings were certain that Christopher was still insane, all of them hoped that his "madness" would precipitate some eccentric act which would benefit them. And, simultaneously, they all feared that some quixotic action on his part might benefit a total stranger. Their dilemma was a complicated one. Christopher was fabulously rich: he was "mad": he might therefore do anything. He might "play the game"—or he might give the whole of his fortune to charity.

The nett result, from my point of view, of all these contrary beliefs was that the Mannerings were certain I had influence over Christopher, whereas, in reality, I had none.

And now a final statement—and one which will seem very obscure.

I know quite well that there is a somewhat sinister explanation of the change which happened to me at Meridian Square. No one knows it better than I do. And, in due course, I will deal with it.

II

I was glad to get to an hotel after my meeting with Rupert. One way and another, I had plenty to think about.

The next morning I went to the bank in order to find out whether Arthur Mannering had made the necessary arrangements. Somewhat to my surprise, I was instantly taken to the manager—Mr. Quiddle.

Mr. Quiddle explained at length how eager he was to do everything he could to help me. Everything! It was a source of deep personal satisfaction to him that Mr. Christopher Bell kept an account at his branch. Deep personal satisfaction! He was delighted at Mr. Bell's recovery. Delighted! Naturally, a man of Mr. Bell's wealth would not concern himself with details but—need he say?—he would be only too glad to act for him in any capacity in which he could be of service. Only too glad! In fact, honoured! As to myself, the necessary arrangements had been made. An account had been opened in my name and one hundred pounds was available for my immediate

needs. In future, the sum of ten pounds a week would be automatically credited. Should I require a temporary overdraft at any time, he would be most happy to arrange it. Most happy! It had been a real pleasure to have this talk with me and he hoped that, any time I was passing, I would look in and see him. He was a firm believer in cordial personal relations with clients, and had always had the warmest regard for Mr. Christopher Bell. The warmest regard! Although, unfortunately, he had met him only once. But he ventured to think he recognized an exceptional man when he met one—and Mr. Bell undoubtedly was remarkable. Most remarkable! And he also ventured to think that any one connected with him—especially in a confidential capacity—must be remarkable too.

Nervous giggles—much shaking of my hand—then Mr. Quiddle opened the door of his sanctum, and bowed me out.

This was the first time any one had unrolled himself, like a strip of red carpet, before my Importance. So I stood in the passage, trying to analyse my reactions. Eventually I decided that only a very remarkable person could remain unaffected by the universal flunkeydom which lackeys Wealth wherever it goes—and I wondered how Christopher responded to it.

I drew twenty pounds—bought some clothes—then returned to my hotel. Just before twelve, a page fetched a taxi—and I told the driver to take me to Meridian Square.

It was a small secluded Square in Knightsbridge—one of those Squares which have been forgotten by some fortunate fluke. Plane trees rustled in a lazy breeze: the green-shuttered houses seemed to be day-dreaming. No one was about. Everything was still. You felt that exiled Silence had found sanctuary here.

I stood, looking round, long after my taxi had disappeared. Certain places wake memories in no way related to them—and Meridian Square had this magic quality. As I stood on the pavement, I remembered all sorts of queer incidents which had happened when I was a child—incidents totally forgotten for more than thirty years.

At last I turned and looked at Christopher's house.

It was an attractive cream-coloured house, not very large, standing some way back. I gazed at the windows, wondering which were those of my room. Then I thought how pleasant it would be to wake here in the morning—to hear the birds singing in the plane trees—to watch the early sunlight slanting into the Square. I had never lived in a house remotely resembling this one. I had known only an endless succession of rooms—and usually squalid ones—in numberless cities all over the world.

I was looking at the seven shallow stone steps leading to the dark-blue front door, when it opened suddenly and a man appeared.

He stood gazing at the sky for some moments, then descended the steps, but came to an abrupt standstill on realizing that I was about to go in and ring the bell.

"It really would be rather dramatic if you should happen to be Vincent Drake."

"Well, I am Vincent Drake."

"*No!*"

"I am."

"That's sim-ply marvellous. There's something I am—literally—dying to know, which only you can tell me. I'm so glad you're half-French. That's an immense help. But I must tell you who I am. *Most* unfortunately, I am Mr. Bristowe—Mr. Godfrey Bristowe—who has been a resident on this earth for some considerable time. One becomes a horrid caricature of oneself after fifty, don't you think?"

The nervous intensity of his most remarkable voice—its subtle inflections, and sudden crescendos of emphasis—so fascinated me that I did not reply. This did not matter, however, as Bristowe went on to explain how "that revolting little Rupert" had told him about me—and that Arthur Mannering had telephoned him from Paris.

While he talked, I watched him.

Bristowe was about middle height, with powerful shoulders and a completely round head, covered with vigorous iron-grey hair. His puckered features twitched perpetually, and he had the most restless eyes I had ever seen. It was evident that this man lived in a non-stop inferno of nerves. He just did not know what to do with his excessive psychic energy, which expressed itself in an endless series of gestures—the most frequent being the sudden raising of his shoulders till they almost reached his ears.

Rupert had told me that Bristowe had married a Teasdale—had been a widower for many years—and had flung away a fortune. The last statement was easy enough to believe because everything about Bristowe suggested extravagance. Anyway, it was necessary only to see him in order to know that he was a highly individualized being—and was therefore as lonely and as conspicuous in the modern world as a peacock in a poultry run.

"It really is sim-ply thrilling to meet you. I've never met a hero before. Never!"

"A hero!"

"Most certainly, yes! You're going to live with Christopher. And I assure you that I have difficulty in breathing in his presence. But

I'd better show you some of the rooms. Why I should have been chosen to decorate them I sim-ply can*not* imagine."

We went into the house.

"I refuse to show you the dining-room, because it's a total failure. Even the cat refuses to eat in it. But *this* is the Blue Room. It's not what I had hoped. I'm always dreaming of a room in which everything plays a mute and mysterious symphony for the eyes. Who was it who wanted that? Baudelaire? I forget. Anyway, this is cool and contemplative, don't you think?"

"It's delightful," I replied. "I'm not surprised you were chosen to decorate the house."

"Oh, but how marvellous of you!" he exclaimed, raising his shoulders till they touched his ears. "I sim-ply adore flattery. I don't mind in the least whether it's sincere or not. It makes my soul purr. In my last incarnation I was a cat—and I wish to heaven I had been one in this. But let's go to the first floor. You'll find the bedrooms rather odd, but it's the way Christopher had them when he lived here for a few months."

"He's only lived here for a few months, then?"

"Yes—years ago. When he was twenty-one, he became a social being for a season. He went everywhere and met every one. Then he disappeared." After a pause, Bristowe asked:

"Is it really true that you know nothing about him?"

"Only what Arthur Mannering told me. He said Christopher had lived many lives—and had the gift of packing a lifetime into a few months."

"Oh, how intelligent of Arthur! Quite a lucid interval. And perfectly true. This house belonged to Alastair Bell. Christopher was a raging success when he lived here. London was crazy about him. Even Lady Agatha approved of him."

"Lady Agatha?"

"She was a Teasdale—but you won't meet her."

"Why not?"

"*Such* a tragedy! Heart-breaking, really. Some weeks ago, Lord Dart told her that he would not be surprised if this country had a pact with Russia one day. Lady Agatha instantly broke out in a red rash—and took to her bed. No one has seen her for months. But here we are."

The landing of the first floor was the size of a hall. Bristowe opened a door facing us, then said:

"This is the Yellow Room. I thought you could use it as a study. It's naïve, don't you think? I wanted to get away from that suicide

note which dominates so many studies. In most of them you can actually hear the echo of the fatal shot."

Almost immediately Bristowe continued:

"You see that this Yellow Room communicates with rooms either side." He opened one of the doors. "This is Christopher's—and yours is just like it."

We entered a remarkable room, but before I could say anything Bristowe went on:

"It runs the whole length of the house, so there are windows at each end. One could make something of this—because that quaint recess for the bed gave one an opportunity. This isn't just another lugubrious bedroom. But *do* tell me! Do you like this thick off-white carpet—and the black furniture? It's rather rich and rhythmic, don't you think?"

Bristowe half-closed his eyes and surveyed the room critically.

"I'm not *sure* about that red-lacquer writing-desk. I wanted it to sing, but I'm not certain that it doesn't shout."

Then, with immense irritation:

"Oh, I suppose the whole thing is sim-ply revolting—the kind of room an arty undertaker would have for his mistress. I suppose undertakers *do* have mistresses, though it seems quite obscene to me."

I told him that I liked the room very much indeed.

"You *do*? Really? What a mercy from on high! Your room is exactly like it. I thought it amusing to have the bedrooms identical—with that rather girlish Yellow Room between them."

I crossed to the windows at the back, then looked down on a walled garden.

"It is a joy, isn't it?" Bristowe exclaimed. "*So* virginal! Positively chaste! And that really is a velvet lawn. Cool, green, immaculate. I think I was insane to put that horrid rustic seat and table there, don't you? But I thought the ghosts might like it."

"So you think the house is haunted?"

Bristowe looked at me intently.

"Don't you think there is something odd about it?"

"Well, perhaps. Anyway, shall we go and sit on the rustic seat before the ghosts turn up?"

"That's brilliant of you! You've sim-ply no idea how charming it is in the garden."

When we were seated on the horrid rustic seat, and had lit our cigarettes, I turned to Bristowe and said:

"Hadn't you a question you were dying to ask me?"

"Oh, my dear, of course I have! But it has a preface. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, you must know that Mr. Bristowe lives in a studio flat which has a spacious view of the Bostock Road. Traffic and hordes of dreary pedestrians hurtle past all day long—and there is a beggar every few yards. Some sell matches, some grind organs, some play tin whistles. And some just stand like monuments of misery. Penury brought them to the gutter—and penury brought Mr. Bristowe to the Bostock Road. And there he exists in his studio flat."

After a pause, he went on:

"Mr. Bristowe, of course, needs a domestic to attend to his creature comforts, and to clean the flat. At the moment he has a griffin, named Mrs. Gubbs. The griffin is supposed to arrive at eight each morning. On the rare occasions when she does so, Mr. Bristowe is made aware of the fact by a crash of crockery in a remote part of the flat. Usually, however, she does not turn up till noon. One returns from one's morning walk to find filthy footmarks on the hall carpet. These are the mark of the Beast. So Mr. Bristowe knows that the griffin has arrived."

He made an expansive gesture with his arms.

"*That* is the preface. And now will you please tell me where you obtained the perfectly marvellous staff you have in this house?"

"What marvellous staff?"

"Why, the one you engaged, of course!"

"I've engaged no one."

"Oh, but my dear, this is sim-ply ridiculous! You'll say soon you haven't even seen them."

"I haven't."

"You've not seen Rosa—or Mr. and Mrs. Grey?"

"No. And never heard of them."

"Then how did they get here?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

I was about to continue, but Bristowe made a movement with his hand towards the house.

A girl was approaching, carrying a small tray. Nothing indicated that she was a servant. She had the loveliest figure, and moved with the grace of a goddess.

When she reached the table she said:

"It's so hot I thought you might like these fruit drinks."

She put two glasses on the table, smiled, then walked slowly back to the house.

"Well, my dear!" Bristowe exploded, "that's proof positive that Rosa is not English! Can you imagine an English maid bringing

anything she had not been asked for? And if you *do* ask for anything, they give notice on the spot."

"Was that Rosa?"

"Of course it was Rosa!"

"Then you're right, Bristowe. The house is haunted. But who is she—and where does she come from?"

"Mr. Bristowe has no idea—none whatever. But one thing is certain. There never has been such a marvellous fruit drink as this in the long history of sad humanity."

"But she *can't* be a maid!" I exclaimed. "I've never seen any one in the least like her."

"I quite agree. She's enchanting. If Christopher found her, I do hope he'll open a domestic agency. Then Mr. Bristowe will sack the griffin—engage a Rosa—and settle down to a really rapturous rheumaticky old age."

"You don't mean to tell me that Mr. and Mrs. Grey are as remarkable as Rosa?"

"Not as remarkable—but they have somewhat the same quality. I'm so glad you noticed it. I thought I must be going insane at last—because I feel a different person when I'm with Rosa. Completely different!"

Then he added, with a spontaneity which evidently surprised him:

"Oh, my dear, I'm *so* miserable that I sim-ply do not know *what* to do! Every day looms before me like a Sahara of sorrow. When I'm alone, I'm half-mad with loneliness. And when I'm with others, I'm wholly mad with loneliness. And my nerves are beginning to play quite dreadful tricks."

"What sort of tricks?"

"I'll tell you. But are you sure that the woes of Mr. Bristowe do not bore you?"

"Quite sure."

"Well, this happened yesterday. I've told you that beggars play musical instruments outside Mr. Bristowe's town residence. Now, I sim-ply can*not* stand the strains of a tin whistle under my windows in the afternoon. I can*not* stand it! I would infinitely rather have an air raid and earthquake combined. Infinitely rather! So I had a notice fastened to the entrance to the flats. No MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS ALLOWED. I printed it in magenta on a white background. You could see it fifty yards away. I think I was right, don't you?"

"Perfectly right."

"Well, yesterday afternoon, at three o'clock, the sound of a tin whistle arose. This woke such a frenzy of rage in me that I flew

downstairs with murder howling in my heart. I flung wide the entrance door."

"Well?" I asked, as Bristowe seemed to be staring at some distant horizon.

"Oh, my *dear*! There, in the gutter, facing me, was a shrivelled old man, playing a tin whistle. So old—so incredibly wretched! We stood gazing at each other. It was frightful. And then—suddenly—it seemed such a miracle that it was not Mr. Bristowe who was old and wretched, and who was playing a tin whistle in the gutter, that I gave the brute a shilling. Then I returned to my flat—overwhelmed with shame."

"Why?"

"Why! Because I had not given the shilling to *him*. I had given it to a Mr. Bristowe whom I had imagined in his circumstances. What could be more despicable? And, now—when Mr. Bristowe wakes in the night—he is haunted by that horrible old man playing his tin whistle. He sees whole armies of derelict men playing tin whistles. And then Mr. Bristowe feels ashamed of being in his warm, comfortable bed. So I've altered the notice downstairs. It now reads: PLEASE PLAY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS: TIN WHISTLES PREFERRED."

He rose—walked rapidly up and down the lawn for a few minutes—then returned to his seat, and said:

"I really must try to be practical. I've a message for you."

"From whom?"

"Mr. Harold Teasdale, my brother-in-law. He's a solicitor and a financial expert. I've no doubt that he is a pillar of society, but I detest him. And I do not think he cherishes an ardent affection for Mr. Bristowe."

"How do you account for that?"

"I think it's because Mr. Bristowe removed his widower's mite from Harold's capable hands. He runs all the business affairs of the Mannerings and the Teasdales. He's a wizard with investments. Or he used to be. No one could make a farthing to-day. Anyhow, he wants you to go to his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields to-morrow afternoon."

"What on earth for?"

"For a family council."

"What about?"

"Christopher."

Then he added:

"You must realize that they all hope to get something out of Christopher. They are all certain he is still mad, so they are all terri-

fied that he'll do something eccentric. But they are all counting on you."

"On *me*!"

"Certainly. To-morrow they are going to discuss the best way of bringing Christopher back to sanity. They want you to help them."

Then Bristowe went on:

"But they do *not* want Mr. Bristowe. Because they are quite convinced that Mr. Bristowe is also mad. Quite convinced! Especially after I told them how much I liked Beulah Island."

"So you've been to Beulah Island?"

"Certainly. It was while I was there that Christopher asked me to decorate this house. And that was odd, you know, because he does not remember any of us."

"You really mean that he did not know who you were—or who Arthur Mannering was?"

"He hadn't the remotest idea. He remembers nothing about his life before he went to Beulah Island."

"You mean, then, that he just picked on Arthur Mannering to find a companion for him?"

"Yes. And he just picked on me to decorate this house. He really is rather uncanny. But I am bound to tell you that Mr. Bristowe felt marvellously at home at Beulah Island. I suppose there *are* dangerous lunatics there, but, if so, I did not see them. Certainly not as dangerous as the lunatics who are running Europe to-day. But this is certain: Mr. Bristowe was radiantly at home in the asylum from the moment of his arrival."

"Well, go on," I said impatiently. "Tell me more about it."

"It's an odd place. The island is practically self-supporting. All the lunatics are calm and tranquil. So different from the sane! The first lunatic I encountered was an old man, who looked like a super tramp. He was rolling on his back in a field of cowslips. It was a marvellous spring day. A blue-and-white day, with lambs skipping about in green fields. Well, I suddenly thought it was a good idea to roll on one's back in a field of cowslips. So Mr. Bristowe had a perfectly marvellous roll with the other lunatic. It was sim-ply grand! The nightmare years fell from me. I was a child again. All the rubbish that others had piled on the luckless Mr. Bristowe—all the filth he had piled on himself—just fell away. I was a child again. It was marvellous! Heavenly! It wasn't happiness. It was Joy!"

After a silence, he went on:

"Then I saw Christopher. And a girl called Irene. She has the same kind of insanity as Christopher's. She's lost her memory too.

She was so beautiful that it hurt to look at her. It hurt, because it made you pity every one who was not like her. I tell you, I couldn't breathe properly while I was with them! But I was a raging success with the lesser lunatics. I can't *tell* you how marvellous they were to me. They were from every class—men, women, and children. Heavenly people! Very strictly between ourselves, Mr. Bristowe intends to go back to Beulah Island one day."

"For good?"

"If they'll have me. I don't see why they shouldn't. The only people who are sane nowadays are the ones who know that they are mad. Besides, if I tell Dr. Fordyce—that's the man who runs the place—some of the things I did when I was regarded as normal, he'll soon see that I am raving. But I shall try one last experiment before I retire to Beulah Island."

"And what's that?"

"I'm going to try my usual way of living for another year."

He didn't seem to want to develop that, so I asked:

"Did you say you wouldn't be at the family council to-morrow?"

"No, Mr. Bristowe will not be there. Mr. Bristowe is going away."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Where are you going—and what are you going to do?"

"I'll tell you. Despite suggestions from innumerable relatives that Mr. Bristowe, aged sixty, should take part in Air Raid Precautions; or become a Fire Fighter; or join the Balloon Barrage; or link up with a Decontaminating Squad; or rattle about with Anti-Aircraft guns—despite these suggestions—I have to inform you that, to-morrow, Mr. Bristowe leaves town, with dog, in a borrowed car, for a cottage in Suffolk—where he proposes to *paint.*"

The emphasis on the last word made it sound like a minor explosion.

"I quite realize," he went on, "that any one who—in May 1938—does not give all his energy to the service of death must be regarded as mentally deficient. Nevertheless, Mr. Bristowe proposes to paint. And he will continue to paint till there are so many planes in the sky that there is no light left. When civilization achieves this final triumph, Mr. Bristowe will put down his brush, and turn his face to the wall—if there is a wall left standing."

He lit a cigarette with a flourish, then leaned back in the manner of one who had reached a final reckoning with destiny.

"If you're going away to-morrow, Bristowe, you must lunch with me to-day."

"That would be sim-ply marvellous! I was terrified of this after-

noon. Sitting alone, surrounded by trunks—with a melancholy dog regarding me with a jaundiced eye."

"Right! We'll lunch together. I'll go into the house to get one or two things. In the meantime, you think of a restaurant."

I left him and went into the house.

When I reached the Yellow Room, I found that the door leading into my bedroom was open. Rosa was unpacking my suitcase. I stood for some moments, watching her.

There are plenty of pretty women in the world, and a few beautiful ones, but Rosa did not seem to belong to either category. Many women could have possessed her physical attractions without resembling her in the smallest degree. She was about twenty-one—dark, slender, with a superbly poised head, cameo-cut features, and remarkable grey eyes. But her essential quality eluded any physical inventory.

I went over to her.

"Who are you?"

"Rosa—the maid."

"But that's—ridiculous!"

"Why?"

"Absolutely ridiculous."

"But *why?*"

"You can't wait on me."

"What does it matter whether I wait on you, or whether you wait on me?"

After a silence, I said:

"No, it doesn't matter."

Then I asked:

"Did Christopher send you here?"

"Yes."

"And did he send Mr. and Mrs. Grey too?"

"Yes."

I don't know how long I gazed at her before I said:

"There's something very odd about all this. I feel I've seen you before somewhere. Perhaps that's because I've imagined you."

Then I went slowly out of the room and down the stairs—to find Bristowe waiting for me in the hall.

"I've thought of a marvellous place to lunch," he announced.

"What? Oh yes, of course, lunch! Well, where are we going?"

"I should love to go to the *Isola Bella,* because I adore Italian food."

"Come on, then. We'll get a taxi."

As we walked through the Square, Bristowe told me what a fool he was to spend the summer in England.

"I really must be quite insane! I nearly always go to Italy. But, *this* summer, Mr. Bristowe is going to stay in England. I know exactly what will happen. I'm not deceived by these fine May days. I shall sit, week after week, eating boiled mutton and caper sauce, with icy rain lashing the window-panes—and the dog howling in the hall."

He went on talking, but I heard little of it.

Eventually I heard him say:

"When did you actually leave Arthur Mannering?"

"Arthur Mannering? Let me think. . . . I was lunching with him in Paris—forty-eight hours ago."

CHAPTER V

Conversation at Midnight

THE LUNCH with Bristowe was such a success that we spent the afternoon and evening together. I left his flat at about eleven-thirty, then walked slowly back to Meridian Square.

It was an hypnotic night: heavy, breathless, still. One of those nights when streets, houses, passers-by are like a vision seen in a trance. Every sound was magnified. My footsteps rang out like those of a giant. The endless Bostock Road, shining under the street lights, seemed to ache with memories of the day's traffic.

As I walked along, I was increasingly aware of a change in myself. So far as I could analyse it, it was a sense of inner exhilaration—a feeling of free and joyous detachment—an up-surging of spontaneity. I felt like a river must feel when the ice goes out in the spring.

When I reached Meridian Square, I stopped and looked round. Night accentuated its unique quality and, again, I derived deep inner satisfaction from the knowledge that I was going to live here for an indefinite period.

The house was in darkness, except for a light on the second floor. I let myself in with the latch-key Rosa had given me, then went slowly upstairs. But, to my astonishment, I did not go to my room, but made my way to the floor above.

I had no plan of any kind. I knew instinctively that the light I had seen on the second floor came from Rosa's room, but I had not a guess why I was going to her—or what I wanted to say. Nothing could be more indicative of my state than the fact that I did not knock before I went into her room.

She was in bed and, directly I saw her, I felt sure she knew that I should come to her.

I gazed at her for some moments, then I said:

"I do not know who you are, Rosa, or why you are here, or anything about you. You're a complete enigma to me. The fact that I've come to your room like this shows that, so far as I am concerned, the normal just does not apply to you. It doesn't apply because you're outside it. There's something very queer about you. You're like someone from a different planet. But one thing is certain. You don't belong here."

"I belong here just as much as you do."

"As *I* do?"

"Yes—just as much. We're alike. That's why we've met."

"We're about as much alike as a new-born child and a corpse! God, if you think that, I'll have to tell you something about myself."

"Tell me anything you like."

"I'll make it pretty crude. It will be clearer that way—and I want it to be clear. You're beautiful—and it's midnight—and I'm in your room. Well, what do you imagine my relations with women have been? I'm a rootless person. I've never belonged anywhere. I've always been a lone wolf. And a lone wolf has a pretty tough time of it—sexually, and in most other ways. You get goaded to all kinds of insanities when you prowl about the world on your own."

Almost immediately, I went on:

"But you create a unique response. Everything about you is different. Your beauty is different. It doesn't madden. There's something very odd about you, Rosa—something damned odd."

"I'm glad you think I'm beautiful," she said simply. "But there's nothing very mysterious about me. I tell you again—we're alike."

I must have looked as astonished as I felt, because she laughed, then said:

"It will all be clear enough soon. You're going to forget the past."

"To forget it!"

"Yes."

"That sounds crazy to me, Rosa."

"But you are crazy. You've been crazy for years. That's why you felt a lone wolf. It's all quite simple, really. Anyway, you must admit that you feel as if you've known me for years."

"That's true enough. All the same, you've got it all wrong. Who *are* you, Rosa?"

"Something rather queer happened to me, that's all."

"And something rather queer happened to Christopher, didn't it?"

"Yes. It's not easy to explain what that something is. You just wake up one day—and find you're a different person. That happens to a lot of people nowadays, and it's going to happen to a lot more. You find you've different thoughts, different feelings. You see everything in a totally different light. So you are called mad."

"Were you called mad, Rosa?"

"Yes, rather. So I went away for a bit."

"To Beulah Island?"

"Yes. Now every one thinks I'm normal again, so no one notices me."

"Surely to God any one as beautiful as you are must create a sensation wherever you go?"

"Only you think I am beautiful."

"I don't know about that. Bristowe does."

"But he's been to Beulah Island. I can promise you that Rupert Mannering does not think I am in the least beautiful. He came here once, and it was quite clear that I was just another maid to him."

Then she added:

"But I do want you to feel at home with me. I want that so much. Perhaps it would help if you did regard me as mad. Someone you rather like, who is mad. Do you think that would help? Is it a bargain?"

She held out her hand. I took it in mine and looked at it.

"Your skin's different," I said at last. "There's something very uncanny about all this. The most uncanny ideas come into my head every minute I'm with you."

"That may be the effect of Meridian Square. Don't you think it has rather a queer atmosphere?"

"Yes, it has. And I know why—now."

"Well, why?"

"Because you're here. That's why. You've bewitched the whole place and every one in it."

She lay back and laughed silently. Her whole body seemed to laugh.

"I'm only Rosa, the maid. And a very efficient maid, as you'll discover in the morning, when I bring up your hot coffee and marvellous rolls and lovely Devonshire butter."

"I tell you again that it's absurd for you to wait on me, Rosa."

"And I tell you again that it doesn't matter whether I wait on you or whether you wait on me. The only thing that matters is that you and I are alike."

She lay back more comfortably on the pillows. For some minutes neither spoke. I gazed at the perfectly shaped head, the cameo-clear features, and the loveliness of her bare arms—till the absurdity of her belief that we were alike became overwhelming.

"Listen, Rosa, I'm going to tell you something about myself—then you'll see just how much we have in common. And you're to listen and not interrupt. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. I shall always obey you."

"Obey me!"

"Yes—always."

I made a movement, to express complete bewilderment at this amazing statement, then said:

"I'm completely at the end of things. That's why I took this job. When I ran into Arthur Mannering in Paris, I had ten pounds in the

world. When they had gone—I should have committed suicide. I didn't tell Mannering that. I lied to him. And I lied to myself. But that's where I'd got to. And now I'll tell *how* I got there."

I paced up and down the room two or three times, then I said:

"I'm only half-English. My mother was French. I didn't have much of a childhood. Not only because of squalor, and the appalling rows between my parents, but also because I was absurdly sensitive. The most trivial things had an effect on me. Also, I was lonely—and loneliness does things to a child.

"I'm going to make this as short as I can, Rosa. My parents died when I was twenty-five—and I became an artist. What's much more important is that I was a supreme egotist. Perhaps that's why I understand Rupert Mannering. Anyway, by the time I was twenty-five I had quite a good camouflage for my sensitivity. In fact, in certain circles, I had quite a reputation for wit—and God knows what! Wit, of course, is nearly always the sign of unhappiness. It's a kind of self-assertion—a flying of flags to hide defeat. Sometimes wit is the largesse of the mind. But not often.

"Most minor artists, Rosa, are victims of their psychic environment. Victims, not victors—like the great artists. To be artists is their only way of becoming somebodies—because they are impotent in the actual world. Well, that's the kind of artist I was."

I began to pace up and down the room again. Although I spoke rapidly, one region of my consciousness was amazed that I was telling all this to a girl whom I had met only a few hours ago. I had told this to no one—and had never really faced up to it myself.

"You've got to understand that I was very proud of all my weaknesses, Rosa. Very proud! They seemed to prove that I was different from others. And I wanted to believe that. All minor artists want to believe that. The great artists know it—and know the price it involves. Incidentally, I experienced most types of degradation. And I was proud of that too.

"All this went on for about ten years. Then, when I was thirty-five, something very odd happened. I suddenly got sick of myself. Just sick to death of myself. All the things of which I had been so proud seemed no more than the results of diseased nerves. I threw everything in. I gave up being an artist. I wandered about the world—waiting for a miracle."

After a silence, I went on:

"That leaves plenty out, Rosa. And plenty that isn't too pretty. But it's enough to show that there's nothing in common between us. The truth about me is that I battered myself to bits. And you think we're alike! You're everything I killed in myself long ago. Most

modern men destroy themselves emotionally—and I'm no exception."

"Don't you believe it. If all that were true, you wouldn't be able to talk about it like that. You're outside it—or you wouldn't be able to see it so clearly. Anyway, it won't exist much longer. You're going to forget it."

"I shan't forget it, Rosa."

"You'll see. Anyway, you're going to have a very busy time here. You won't be able to see much of me."

"But you'll stay here?"

"Yes, I'll stay."

I stood looking down at her. For some reason I wanted to believe that her power over me was derived wholly from her beauty—but I could not believe it.

"I shall believe you exist only when I am with you, Rosa. And I shall know peace only when I am with you."

Then I went out of the room—feeling that I had suddenly awakened from a dream.

CHAPTER VI

Family Council: May 1938

I

At eleven o'clock the next morning I was sitting at my desk in the Yellow Room. For half an hour I had been glancing at a number of letters from unknown people—each of whom evidently expected notable benefits from Christopher's return to the world—when the telephone bell rang.

I picked up the receiver, gave my name, then someone asked if I could speak to Mr. Harold Teasdale. I replied that I could and I would.

After a perceptible lapse of time, a very cultured voice informed me that Mr. Harold Teasdale was speaking. An impressive pause followed this announcement. Mr. Harold Teasdale then expressed the opinion that his name was probably not unknown to me. I said it was not unknown. Whereupon he gave me a brief outline of his professional relations with the Mannering and Teasdale families—most of which I had heard already from Rupert and Bristowe.

I listened to little of it, chiefly because Mr. Harold Teasdale's voice was so flexible—so modulated—so placating—so precise—and so persuasive—that I felt I was listening to a virtuoso's performance on a rare instrument. I felt he, too, was listening to it with a connoisseur's appreciation. Also, I felt it was peculiarly appropriate that I should hear this voice for the first time over the telephone. It came from the void, and there was nothing therefore to distract attention from its rich and ripe qualities.

The tone adopted by The Voice in regard to me was a complex one. This was inevitable, because, after all, who was Vincent Drake? A stranger—and a nobody. And yet it was necessary for The Voice not only to recognize the existence of this stranger and this nobody, but also to establish confidential relations with him. Not on the level of Equality. That was unthinkable. Dignity had to be maintained. And Dignity demands distance. Patronage, therefore, had to be the dominant note. But a regal patronage. The patronage which overwhelms by its affability—and therefore widens the gulf between donor and recipient, while seeming to narrow it.

But The Voice had problems other than this, and one was to hint

that it understood I had met only Arthur and Rupert Mannering, and Godfrey Bristowe—and that although, of course, there was nothing against any of them, still, possibly, they were not representative of the families to which they belonged; or—in the case of Bristowe—of the family into which he had married. Arthur Mannering was a delightful person—quite delightful—but—should we say?—somewhat of a *flâneur*. The Voice thought that was the word. As to Rupert—well—possibly—we need not concern ourselves unduly with him. Regarding Godfrey Bristowe, no one could be more charming, but, after all, Bristowe was an artist and—should we say?—a trifle eccentric, like so many artists. It would therefore be an error, a cardinal error, for me to form an opinion on the Christopher situation—a situation of extreme gravity—until I had met the more normal and the more responsible members of the families concerned.

Another of The Voice's problems was the necessity for implying that it did not accept Arthur Mannering's account of the manner in which I had become Christopher's companion. The Voice did not suggest that Arthur Mannering had lied. Certainly not. He had not lied—and he had not told the truth. Not that The Voice was inviting my confidence. By no means. Anything necessary for The Voice to discover—The Voice would discover. The Voice had its own methods—and tolerably successful those methods had proved in the course of a long and a very varied experience.

All this was implied. The Voice never made a direct statement. It speculated: it suggested: it evoked. It anticipated objections. It assumed agreement. And it remained silkily suave.

Finally, The Voice announced its main theme. This was to the effect that it had been decided to hold a family council—at The Voice's offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields—at which the question of Christopher was to be discussed. The Voice hoped it would be convenient for me to attend—at three o'clock that afternoon.

I said it would be convenient, but it must be understood that my position at the council would be a somewhat anomalous one. Nevertheless, as my presence was desired, I would turn up at three o'clock. I then added that perhaps it would be as well for me to know what, precisely, was going to be discussed.

The Voice did not vouchsafe an answer to that question. It proceeded to explain that it had not convened this council. On the contrary. Various members of the Mannering and Teasdale families had thought this council desirable—and The Voice had acceded to their repeated requests. Frequently, in the course of a long and a very varied experience, it had been necessary to adopt a dubious course of action owing to the obduracy of the ignorant. Had this family

council really been essential, The Voice would have convened it. The very fact that others wanted it was presumptive evidence of its undesirability. But, frequently, it was necessary to gratify the foibles of others—and the calling of this council was a regrettable instance of that necessity.

Then, having created the impression that The Voice was as lonely as Wisdom in a world of fools, a pause ensued—a pause which implied that it would be appropriate for me to express unqualified agreement.

What I did was to ask again the precise nature of the subject to be discussed at the family council. Whereupon The Voice, with infinite patience, suggested that, surely, there could be only one subject to discuss. And that subject was the most efficacious means of leading the demented Christopher back to sanity. Whereupon I made the somewhat superfluous comment that Christopher was evidently assumed to be still insane.

As to that—The Voice informed me—there could be no doubt. Unhappily, no doubt whatever. Of all the evidence available, it was necessary to quote only one recent example of his abnormality. Since the day on which Christopher had been certified sane, The Voice had had no communication of any kind from him. No communication of any kind. And now Christopher was master again of his immense fortune.

When The Voice thought of that—when it reflected on the dangers inherent in that situation—it shuddered.

Then, having shuddered, The Voice hung up the receiver.

II

I was in the hall, getting ready to leave for the family council, when the front door opened and Rosa came in.

I watched her in silence as she put down a basket of fruit, then crossed to a mirror, and ran her slim fingers through her hair. She was wearing a light summer dress, no stockings, and looked delightfully cool as she stood with bare arms raised, adjusting her hair.

At last I went to her and said:

"I'm just off to a family council about Christopher at Harold Teasdale's office."

"That'll be fun for you."

"Do you think so?"

"Great fun."

The haunting quality of her voice held me for a moment, then I said:

"I'm not so sure it will be. In fact, I doubt whether I ought to go. I owe everything to Christopher—and now I'm going to meet a pack of his relatives who are all quite certain he is still mad."

"Should not bother about that, if I were you. I'm glad you're going."

"Why?"

"Because you'll meet the sane. And that will make you much fonder of the mad Rosa."

"I'm a good deal too fond of the mad Rosa as it is."

"Certain?"

"Quite certain."

"That's marvellous. Will you tell me all about it when you come back?"

"I shall always tell you everything, Rosa. I've already told you things I've never told any one."

She stood, looking up at me, with the oddest expression—an expression which seemed the meeting place of a dozen different emotions.

"Do you know," I said suddenly, "that in the seventeenth century they would have burned you for a witch?"

"Perhaps they did. Perhaps I've returned to get my own back."

Then she added:

"Have you any plan of campaign for this afternoon? Any idea of what you are going to say or do?"

"None whatever."

"That's grand. You'd better go, or you'll be late."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Lie in the sun in the garden and eat that fruit. Or stand at a window and look at the Square. Or make a fish salad for you—which you will eat under the laburnum tree at the rising of the moon. What does it matter what one does?"

"But aren't you ever bored?"

"Never. Only the sane are bored."

She laughed at my bewilderment.

"I'm damned if I can make head or tail of you, Rosa."

"Why not? I've quite a nice head—and not at all a bad tail."

"I know it. That's one reason why you are mysterious. If you were some wraith-like creature——"

"But I'm not! I'm a woman!"

"Yes, you're a woman. The first I've met."

She danced round the hall—then suddenly stood still as a statue, with arms outstretched.

"Mad Rosa! The first woman!"

She held the pose for a few moments, then came to me and said:

"You really must go, or you'll be very late."

"All right. I'll go. But I've a queer feeling that in some mysterious way you will be with me."

Then, scarcely knowing what I was doing, I leaned down—intending to kiss her forehead. She put her arms round me and offered her lips. Her kiss was as frank and as generous as a child's.

I walked through the Square, like a man in a trance, then—discovering it was later than I had thought—I hailed a taxi.

Harold Teasdale's chambers were in a lovely old house, in front of which was a spacious unevenly paved courtyard. One had only to open the iron gate, and go down the stone path leading to the entrance, in order to feel that the modern world was receding. The certainties of a serener age caressed the scene. Here Dignity dwelt in proud seclusion. The years might pass—years packed with catastrophic change—but this mellow house in Lincoln's Inn Fields would make no compromise with them. The stones of the path would become more worn. But that was all. Time-defying Virtues resided here, and were not to be dismayed—no matter how dark the horizon, or how ominous the howling of the wind.

I pushed open a heavy door, studded with nails, and entered a hall of perpetual twilight. Fastened to a wall was a white board on which was printed in bold black letters:

MR. HAROLD TEASDALE.

First Floor.

Near the bottom of the shallow stairs was a kind of sentry box, from which a commissionaire emerged. On learning that I wished to see Mr. Harold Teasdale, he assumed a consequential air, and informed me that Mr. Harold Teasdale's offices were on the first floor. His manner implied that it would be quite impossible for Mr. Teasdale's offices to be on any floor other than the first.

The stone stairs leading to this sacrosanct first floor were so hollowed by pilgrim feet that it was difficult not to speculate on the nature of the necessity which had led them to Mr. Harold Teasdale.

I opened a door on which ENQUIRIES was painted in large letters—and instantly became aware that these offices were unlike those of lesser men. No youth came forward to attend to me, but a willowy

gentleman of about fifty, wearing a morning coat. So willowy, so correct, that I half-thought he was The Voice. But a buzz of conversation from an adjoining room—and a certain obsequiousness in the manner of the statuesque clerk—on learning that I was Mr. Vincent Drake—soon convinced me that Mr. Harold Teasdale inhabited a realm far removed from the room in which ENQUIRIES were made.

As the immaculate clerk did not seem quite certain how to proceed, I said to him:

"I'm rather late. I expect they are all here. Better just announce me, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir. Perhaps that would be best. Mr. Teasdale hoped you would arrive before the others. He is anxious to have a private word with you."

He went to a solid-looking door, opened it to its widest extent, then announced in a resonant tone:

"Mr. Vincent Drake."

Instantly, the buzz of conversation subsided.

I found myself confronted by a number of men, and three or four elderly women. They were standing about in little groups round a big table in the centre of a spacious room. A room which, normally, was evidently used for conferences or Board meetings. These well-dressed leisured people seemed somewhat incongruous with their surroundings, but I had little time to observe it because Mr. Harold Teasdale—having shaken my hand—announced to the assembled company that I was Mr. Vincent Drake, of whom they had all heard, and to whom—doubtless—they would make themselves known individually in due course.

Then he returned to the man to whom he had been talking—and conversation flickered up again in the various groups round the table.

This mass introduction was appropriate to the situation. Any other method would have been cumbersome, and I was speculating on Harold Teasdale's adroitness, when a red-faced burly man shambled over to me and said in a somewhat hoarse whisper:

"Vernon Mannering. That's my name. I'm off now. Train to catch. I came in on chance. Didn't know this do was on. If you don't believe a word you hear, you won't go far wrong."

He then emitted a kind of catacomb chuckle, and went out—leaving a rich aroma of whisky behind him.

Almost immediately, his place was taken by an aristocratic old lady, with piercing black eyes and formidable features, framed in silver hair, who asked whether I was one of the Barset Drakes. I

replied in the negative. She then inquired if I was one of the Riverham Drakes. Again I replied in the negative. Whereupon she stared for several minutes in total bewilderment at a Drake who belonged to no recognized aviary.

That suited me admirably for two reasons. Her presence protected me from the attentions of any one else: and her silence enabled me to study the other occupants of the room.

It was an odd party. Most of the men were well over fifty and, presumably, were Mannerings or Teasdales. It seemed queer to be in a room with relatives of the lovely Viola Teasdale, but I was interested chiefly in two younger men who were sitting, some distance apart, at the table. I felt certain that the younger, who looked like a marooned intellectual, was Ernest Mannering: and that the big-shouldered man with angry eyes—who kept looking at his watch—was Douglas. I remembered how Arthur Mannering had said to me, in the Place du Tertre: "Douglas and Ernest are married—and you'll see what they have made of it."

But I had little time to study them, because the whole situation was rapidly developing into a comedy.

There were several reasons for this. In the first place, although conversation was still animated in the little groups round the table, it was obvious that no one listened to anything any one said. In reality, I was the centre of the stage. And although attempts were made to mask curiosity by various methods of social technique, it was too intense to be wholly hidden.

I suppose that was inevitable, because here was the Mystery Man—in the flesh! Here was the unknown Vincent Drake, who had become Christopher's companion in such remarkable circumstances! Circumstances so remarkable that they could be regarded only as camouflage designed to hide a secret relationship. Vincent Drake, therefore, was a highly suspicious person—but one whom they must placate. He was a potential ally—and a powerful one. In fact, this nobody, this Vincent Drake, was in the position of regent to a fabulously wealthy king—who was about to ascend the throne.

The situation was high comedy if only because the outward behaviour of those present bore no relation to their real activities. Outwardly, I was being ignored. Actually, I was the centre of interest.

Eventually, however, I ceased to be concerned with any one except Harold Teasdale. Most of the others were interesting enough in their way, but one could deduce their chief characteristics from their appearance, whereas there was an enigmatic quality about the lawyer which isolated him.

He was tall, slender—almost elegant—and wore a superbly fitting morning coat with great distinction. All his attitudes had a statuesque quality. The only gesture he permitted himself was an occasional deprecatory movement of his very white hands. The poise of the narrow head suggested splendid isolation from the vulgarities of a plebeian age. The prominent chin and cheek-bones, the bold nose—the mask-like imperturbability of the features—all created an impression of aloofness from minor mundane matters. It was necessary only to see Harold Teasdale in order to feel that here was rarity, refinement, culture. Here was a survival of high tradition. This was a being who moved delicately and disdainfully through the sordid clamour of the modern world. Here was a connoisseur of values—in an age that had none.

He was clean-shaven, and I guessed he was about sixty, but his actual age seemed unimportant. Some people change little with the years, and I felt that Harold Teasdale was one of them.

At the moment, a fat, fussy, excitable man was talking to him with great volubility. The physical contrast between them was remarkable enough, but the lawyer's attitude gave it an almost ludicrous emphasis. He stood, listening, with head slightly to one side, and eyebrows raised. His expression seemed to say:

"You see? I am giving you my attention. You are, of course, talking the most ridiculous rubbish, but—I am listening. Experience has accustomed me to fools. You are, perhaps, the greatest I have ever encountered—nevertheless I am placing my imperial intellect at your disposal. There are, naturally, limits to my patience. When they are reached, I shall make one statement which will convince even you that you are talking the most fearful nonsense. In the meantime, I am listening. I am listening, although innumerable matters of major importance await my attention. Surely, soon, even you will realize what an abject fool you are making of yourself."

But despite the studied elegance of his appearance, and despite his statuesque attitudes, only a very superficial observer could have regarded Harold Teasdale as a ludicrous figure. There was nothing in the least ludicrous about his eyes, which were those of a man who had immense ability. There could be no doubt about that. He had bold probing eyes, with a wide luminous range. Usually they were half-hidden by heavy lids, as if their owner instinctively realized that few situations would demand the full extent of their eagle capacity.

At this point, however, two incidents occurred in rapid succession. The first was that the old lady by my side suddenly decided she must convey to others the astonishing discovery that I was neither a Barset

nor a Riverham Drake. So she left me to join a group near the table.

The other incident related to Harold Teasdale—who had evidently decided that the time had come to silence his fat, fussy, excitable friend. Accordingly he interrupted him in order to make one statement—which instantly reduced his companion to a condition of stammering incoherence.

Harold Teasdale then addressed the room:

"Time is passing, ladies and gentlemen. And time, for some of us, is important. So I suggest we now discuss a subject in which you are all very interested."

III

Silence was the first effect of Harold Teasdale's suggestion.

Every one suddenly realized that this council was a corporate affair, not an occasion for general chatter. There was a definite subject to be discussed—and contributions would have to be made in the hearing of all. Henceforth, the proceedings would be formal. The long table, with Harold Teasdale now seated at the head of it, assumed a tribunal air which impressed even the frivolous. No longer would it be possible to pepper one's remarks with scandal, or to spice them with anecdote. Responsible statements on a serious subject were now required. And they would have to be made in the presence of the mysterious Vincent Drake—now seated next to Harold Teasdale, and listening to the remarks of that gentleman with reverent attention.

Evidently every one had discovered that a formal discussion of the Christopher situation presented complex difficulties, for the silence continued until it became embarrassing. The desire to see the unknown Vincent Drake had been so intense that it had forgotten the barriers which his presence would erect. Now, however, those barriers were very apparent. How could Christopher be discussed with any freedom before a man who had become his companion in such unorthodox circumstances? They had insisted on meeting this Vincent Drake—and now he was here. And they were beginning to realize the restrictions imposed by his presence. Hence their embarrassment.

Harold Teasdale did nothing to dispel it. They had wanted this family council and, if it proved a total failure, they would be less likely to be rebellious in the future.

"Come, come, ladies and gentlemen!" he said at last, in a tone

very different from his customary one. "If none of you has anything to say, perhaps you will explain why you were all so eager for a discussion. Mr. Vincent Drake has been good enough to come here, at my request, although he returned to England only a day or two ago. I do not imagine that he wishes to waste his time any more than I wish to waste mine."

This challenge had a galvanizing effect on the company, most of whom were now seated at the table. Finally, a mottle-faced man, in a very remarkable tweed suit, turned to a parson next to him and said:

"Go on, Creepy! You say something. I've only known you struck dumb once—and that was after they'd read old Martha's will, and she hadn't left you a bob."

The parson removed his pince-nez—polished the lenses—then fixed it again on his long slender nose. After which he looked round the table with keen bird-like eyes, apparently to convince himself that he was commanding attention. Then, having darted his tongue through his thin, tightly compressed lips, he said in a high, clear tenor voice:

"This meeting was, I believe, my idea—primarily. The issue, as I saw it, and as I see it, is a perfectly clear one. Christopher—most mistakenly, in my judgment—has been certified sane. Consequently he is master again of his immense fortune."

A pregnant pause.

"One does not, of course, want to say anything derogatory of one's fellow-creatures. But human nature being what it—most unfortunately—is, it would be idle to deny that the risk of the demented Christopher being imposed upon by evilly disposed persons is a serious one. A very serious one."

Then, more emphatically:

"Now, I know I am speaking for all present when I say that no one here is actuated by selfish motives. We all have Christopher's interests at heart—and only his. Our sole desire is to protect him from his own eccentric impulses—and to shield him from the machinations of less well-disposed people than ourselves."

This tribute to the company's altruism produced a murmured chorus of "Just so.". . . "Of course.". . . "Hear, hear!" Many assumed expressions of high moral rectitude. But the general effect of the parson's speech was marred partly by Douglas Mannering—who gave a great shouting laugh—and partly by the mottle-faced gentleman in the remarkable tweed suit, who exclaimed:

"That's all right, Creepy! I knew you'd ride the moral high-horse. But just how do you propose to protect Christopher from crooks?

Assuming, of course, that his relatives don't have a crack at him before the crooks get a chance."

"I resent that, Buck!" exclaimed an elderly man, who looked like a retired Army officer. "I resent it very much."

"You can resent it as much as you like, Pimple. D'you think I don't know that every one here intends to have a shot at Christopher? Of course they do! And quite right too. Keep the money in the family. Creepy can't throw moral dust in my eyes. We all want money. Damned badly! And a lot of it. We're all confoundedly hard-up, by our standards. That's the fact, and you know it. If you don't know it, ask Foxy. All our secrets are known to him, because all our affairs are in his hands."

I gathered that "Foxy" was Harold Teasdale. Incidentally, as nicknames were used exclusively during the whole of the discussion, it was difficult to discover the identity of many of these distinguished people.

"Might I make a suggestion?" asked a dapper barrel-shaped man, with a mild expression and watery eyes. "Might I suggest that we are getting away from the point? Surely the real danger is some eccentric act on Christopher's part."

"Oh, for God's sake, Dumpty! Say what you mean!" Buck exclaimed. "Let's have an example."

"He might give the whole of his fortune to charity."

"That will never happen."

An old lady opposite me rapped out this statement in a tone of such fervent conviction that the whole room reverberated. She must have been nearly ninety, but the hawk-like features and the indomitable eyes had evidently decided to stand no nonsense from Time.

"And how do you know that?" Buck demanded. "How do you know that Christopher will not give the whole of his fortune to charity?"

"God would not permit it."

Now, whenever the name of God is mentioned seriously—outside a church—it creates a complicated reaction. The present occasion was no exception. The silence which followed this declaration of faith resembled that which ensues after the explosion of a bomb. Every one felt that a tremendous Irrelevancy had been hurled into the discussion. And every one resented it. How could one talk about practical affairs if God were to be dragged into them? How could one be normal, natural, and sincere? Besides, the name of God was associated with the thought of death. And no one wanted to be reminded of that.

Buck was the first to recover.

"That's all very well for you, Tabitha. You've a great faith. You're a Victorian. But the fact remains that God allows a lot of queer things to happen. Very queer indeed! I'll give you an example. Plantagenet did *not* win the two-thirty yesterday—although I know for a fact that the stable had backed him to the limit."

This failure of divine omnipotence to function effectively in human affairs did not impress the company. Unlike Buck, they had not lost money by it. Consequently the foundations of their faith remained unshaken.

"Come, come, ladies and gentlemen!" Harold Teasdale exclaimed vigorously. "Surely we have not met to discuss theological subtleties! We have one thing to decide and one only. And that is the best means of restoring Christopher to sanity."

At this point, it is necessary to explain that I had decided to say nothing at this council, except in reply to a direct question. I reached this decision soon after the discussion started—and fully intended to abide by it.

Consequently I was astonished when I suddenly heard myself say:

"I think I had better make one or two things quite clear. And the first is that it is impossible for me to discuss Christopher Bell as if he were still mad. He has been certified sane—and I intend to regard him as sane. In fact, I cannot discuss him at all. I have been engaged as his companion—and I am being paid by him. Obviously, therefore, it is out of the question for me to criticize him in any way."

This announcement created a sensation. In the first place, these people simply could not imagine a moral issue which conflicted with their interests. To them, Morality *was* Self-interest. Self-interest—in its Sunday best.

In the second place, they regarded my declaration of loyalty to Christopher as a criticism of them. Here was this nobody, this Vincent Drake, refusing in set terms to discuss the madness of Christopher when they had all come to Harold Teasdale's office for that specific purpose! It was a thrust at *them*. This Vincent Drake must be a Communist.

Harold Teasdale was the first to recover.

"A very proper attitude," he announced, "and one that does Mr. Drake infinite credit. The world would be a much pleasanter place than it is if such loyalty to employers were general. Of course Mr. Drake cannot criticize Christopher in any way! And of course Mr. Drake is right to assume that Christopher is sane! Any other attitude would be highly improper."

A long pause followed—during which Harold Teasdale seemed to

inhale the discomfiture of his audience. Then he made a little deprecatory movement with his white hands as he said :

" What we have to do is to discover a formula which will enable Mr. Drake to discuss insanity with perfect freedom—and without detriment to his loyalty to Christopher."

" *You'll* find a formula, Foxy," Buck announced confidently. " I've always said you ought to be a politician. A politician's whole job nowadays is trying to find a formula for something or other. I'd back you to find one that would reconcile God with the Devil."

Harold Teasdale totally ignored these tributes to his ability.

" I have no doubt," he said, addressing the company at large, " that every one of you has many original ideas on the subject of insanity. It would be a misfortune if they blossomed unseen. One minor restriction must be imposed, however. You must not express those ideas in relation to Christopher. A formula is therefore necessary. And the one I suggest is : What are the most efficacious means of bringing *someone* back to sanity?"

Then he turned to me and asked :

" You would, I take it, have no objection to a general discussion on that purely impersonal subject?"

" None whatever," I replied.

" You see? Mr. Drake has no objection. You all wanted to meet here to discuss insanity. And now you are all perfectly free to do so."

Harold Teasdale leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Silence ensued. A silence which became more profound the longer it continued. No one seemed to want even to look at any one. Then a minor epidemic of coughing broke out—which was followed by an uneasy alteration of attitudes. Someone broke the point of a carefully sharpened pencil. Then—silence again. A silence which became deafening.

If Harold Teasdale had wanted this family council to prove a complete fiasco, he could not have devised a more perfect stratagem for ensuring that result. By transferring the theme of insanity from the particular to the general, he had outlawed many a well-rehearsed oration. It was Christopher's immense fortune which interested these people. All they wanted to discuss was a means of protecting that fortune from some quixotic act of its owner—or from the machinations of adventurers. And here was Harold Teasdale suggesting that they should talk about insanity in general terms!

" Come, come, ladies and gentlemen! Surely you had some ideas in your heads when you pressed me to call this meeting! You force me to remind you that it was you who wanted it. Surely, in this

distinguished company, someone has a theory as to the best way of leading a demented person back to the path of sanity."

"I most certainly have!" Buck announced with immense emphasis. "But I'm not saying what it is—as there are ladies present."

He crossed noisily to the fireplace, then—having scratched the more intimate parts of his anatomy with remarkable vigour—he said to the parson:

"Surely to God, Creepy, you've some ideas on the subject!"

The parson fidgeted—removed his pince-nez—put it on again—coughed—blinked—then said jerkily:

"It is—naturally—somewhat difficult—in fact, very difficult—to discuss such a subject in abstract terms. Possibly—but I only suggest this—possibly it would be fruitful if a mentally deficient person were to study some serious subject. Such as—for instance—British foreign policy since 1920."

"You think, Creepy, that would soon make him sane?"

"I think it possible."

Buck turned to me.

"And what do *you* think?"

I said it was an idea.

Silence followed. Then the dapper barrel-shaped man suggested that a study of the economic situation might cause the sun of reason to rise over a clouded mind.

After which, a number of suggestions were advanced.

One was that a series of visits to armament factories might restore a feeble intellect by creating a sense of Security. Someone else thought that, if you could induce a lunatic to build a bomb-proof shelter in his garden, it might bring him back to normality. Another suggested that a thorough study of all aspects of Air Raid Precautions—especially that dealing with the results of poison gas—might minister to a mind diseased, and soothe it back to sanity.

But the old lady of ninety did not think much of these suggestions.

Her idea was that the lunatic should be made to understand some fact which, on the face of it, seemed somewhat paradoxical. For instance, she went on, it was rumoured that there was going to be an immense wheat crop. Well, it should be explained to the lunatic just why this would be a dreadful disaster. The old lady admitted that, at one time, this had been a mystery to her, but—having read an article by a famous economist—she now understood why an immense wheat crop would be a catastrophe. In fact, she now understood so well that she prayed to God, night and morning, that suffering humanity might be spared this fearful visitation.

But although these suggestions and many others were advanced,

the discussion had a thin theoretical air. No one cared tuppence about any "lunatic" except Christopher. So, gradually, the company split up again into little groups—with the result that the big table was almost deserted. Finally, it became very obvious that every one was longing to go, but feared to be the first to leave.

And then Douglas Mannering provided an excuse.

He had not contributed a word to the discussion, but had sat, leaning forward, in an attitude which accentuated the size of his heavy shoulders. Every now and again he had scanned his companions with angry eyes—and had continued to look at his watch with ever-increasing frequency.

He now rose—pushing his chair back so violently that it fell to the floor with a crash. Then, having surveyed the somewhat startled company for some moments, he threw up his arms—gave his great shouting laugh—and almost ran out of the room.

His brother, Ernest, left a few minutes later. He, too, had not spoken once during the discussion but had sat, erect and isolated—his scholarly features distorted, as if he were aware of a bad smell. Somehow, he had created the impression that he disliked every one present, with the exception of Douglas—whom he hated.

His departure heralded a general exodus.

Buck was the last to leave.

Having raised his hand to slap Harold Teasdale on the back—and having thought better of it—he offered to provide me with a number of addresses in Paris and London at which Christopher and I would get a hot welcome if we mentioned his name.

"Take my tip—and try it. If you go to Jenny's place, ask for Mitzi. If she doesn't make him normal, nothing will."

Buck then lit a cigar—and went jauntily out of the room.

Harold Teasdale and I were alone.

"I never cease to be slightly surprised, Mr. Drake, by the fact that people are such fools collectively—whereas, individually, they are often quite intelligent. Do not, I beg of you, judge these persons by their behaviour to-day. Many of them are acute, in their degree. It would be unwise to underestimate them—especially in your position. Very unwise."

He paused, in order to allow me to appreciate the implications of these simple-sounding statements, then went on:

"Let us go to my room for a few minutes. It is more intimate than this one."

I followed him to his private office, which was a small room overlooking Lincoln's Inn Fields. Two or three rare prints adorned the walls: a thick pile carpet deadened the sound of our movements. A

period table stood in the corner near the window, and two spacious armchairs, facing the light, gaped invitingly for clients. The intimacy of the room was not marred by any sign of professional activity, but a certain tensity in the atmosphere suggested that many a critical interview had been held here.

He seated himself at the table, studied his nails scrupulously for some moments, then began to discuss the Christopher problem in an impartial manner and in general terms.

I had already discovered that what Harold Teasdale actually said was of minor importance, but I realized it more deeply as I sat listening to him now. He was an adept in creating atmosphere—in implying intimacy—in suggesting agreement.

He did not mention me once during his long commentary on the Christopher situation, but, nevertheless, he managed to indicate that he regarded me as his equal intellectually. Not socially—that was unthinkable—but intellectually. And he did this chiefly by speaking as if he were thinking aloud—as if he had left the door of his mind ajar, knowing that the listener was worthy to share his soliloquy.

I had no illusions, however. I knew I was not this man's equal on his own level. In fact, so certain was I of this that I decided not to ask a number of questions which had occurred to me during the family council. I felt it wiser to let him direct the conversation, and to speak only when it was necessary to say something.

"The collective stupidity of these persons this afternoon, Mr. Drake, was revealed chiefly by their omission to ask a certain question. Doubtless, you noticed it."

I said it had escaped me.

"Really? How very odd! Surely you were struck by the fact that they did not ask you when Christopher is coming to Meridian Square? That was extraordinary—as you are the only person who knows."

"But I don't know."

"Really?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"How very odd!"

There was a lengthy pause, then he asked:

"You like the house, Mr. Drake?"

"Very much."

"And you had no difficulty about staff, and so on?"

"No—none."

"Excellent! And now, before you go, there are one or two—quite minor—matters I should like to mention. The first is that you will certainly be pestered by a number of people. That is certain, but I

shall not be one of them. Later, when the situation is more defined, you and I will know what to do."

Another pause.

"Having had the pleasure of meeting you, Mr. Drake, I realize that it is unnecessary to warn you against schemers, however well-meaning they may appear. Finally, I want to say this: I am usually here on Sundays and, quite often, on Saturday afternoons. That is necessary for two reasons. One is that much of my time is wasted on unnecessary discussions—this afternoon being an example—and the second reason is that as I have to spend two or three days in Paris each month, on important business, I try to overtake London arrears by working during the week-ends. But please keep that confidential. I want you to know it, so that we can consult whenever necessary, but I certainly do not want it known to others. Were it known, I should have clients here every week-end."

He rose and I rose with him. Then, as I was about to say good-bye, he announced that he would come down with me in order to get a breath of fresh air.

We descended the worn stairs in silence, then he held the heavy nail-studded door open for me to pass into the courtyard.

As we strolled down the stone path leading to the iron gate, I felt I was a guest in a country house and that Harold Teasdale was my host. His gracious proprietorial manner seemed to embrace the whole of Lincoln's Inn Fields with a wide gesture of benevolent ownership. You felt that the passers-by were there only because the grounds were thrown open on certain days—and that this was one of them.

After a somewhat ceremonious farewell, we parted at the iron gate.

I walked about twenty yards, then turned and looked back. He was still standing where I had left him—a slender, immaculate, lonely figure, gazing at the sky.

I walked most of the way home, speculating on the probable nature of future developments.

When I turned the corner of Meridian Square, I saw Rosa coming slowly towards me. She moved with such grace that I stopped in order to prolong the pleasure of watching her.

She did not speak when she came level with me, and we walked slowly together for some moments towards the house until she said:

"Well—how did you get on with the sane?"

"The best answer I can give is that I am very glad to be back with mad Rosa."

"Good!"

"What's not so good is that you certainly are having a very odd

effect on me. I seem to be changing into a different person. I keep doing things which aren't in the least what I intended to do."

"That's grand. You can tell me about those people later. Let's forget them now."

"That suits me."

When we reached the house, I asked:

"What about that fish salad?"

"It's ready."

"Under the laburnum tree?"

"Yes."

"When do we eat it?"

"At the rising of the moon."

"Is there a moon to-night, Rosa?"

"I haven't a guess."

She took my arm and we went slowly into the garden.

CHAPTER VII

The First Visitor

For many reasons it is impossible to give an adequate account of the extraordinary events which happened immediately after the family council at Harold Teasdale's offices. It is not possible to record a tenth of them, and, if it were, that record would be a succession of isolated adventures whereas, actually, they were so inter-related that they seemed to happen " simultaneously."

But the chief reason why any account of these events would necessarily be inadequate is that I led two lives during practically the whole of my stay at Meridian Square. One " life " was concerned wholly with the Mannerings and the Teasdales; and the other was concerned wholly with the world to which Rosa introduced me.

It is essential to explain this duality, and it is not easy to explain it.

I had met most kinds of people in a good many different countries, but had never encountered any one remotely resembling Rosa and, in a lesser degree, Mr. and Mrs. Grey. None of them ever said or did anything outwardly remarkable, but to be in their presence was to become instantly aware of a quality which transformed the most trivial everyday things. That sounds attractive but, in reality, it was disturbing to discover that to be with them involved becoming a stranger to oneself—a being with different desires, different aims, different thoughts, different feelings. And, before very long, *not* to be with them was to experience the sensations of an exile.

The remarkable relations which were established between us were clearly revealed by our communal life together when we were alone. I must stress " when we were alone," because the house was invaded by visitors at all hours of the day and, frequently, I lunched or dined out with a Mannering or a Teasdale—or with someone who claimed to be a friend of Christopher, and who expected notable benefits from his return to the world.

But, directly we had the house to ourselves, an entirely new régime established itself. For the first time in my life, I felt in organic relations with those round me. A secret allegiance united us. It was like suddenly finding oneself a member of a religious order—of a totally new kind—in which all customary distinctions ceased to have meaning. For instance, the fact that I was Christopher's companion—and, presumably, received a much larger salary than Rosa or the Greys—created no barrier between us. It had just nothing to do with any-

thing. Directly the four of us were alone together, we were not only free, but free in the terms of a freedom which regulated every detail of our relations in accordance with its own mysterious laws.

It was an odd experience to open the front door—and to find myself in another world. Serenity greeted you as you crossed the threshold. Everything instantly acquired different values. The song of a bird in the garden had a new ecstasy. The sound of footsteps overhead promised adventure. The shape and shadows of things were transformed. To enter the house was to feel benediction descend like an answered prayer.

The most ordinary details of everyday existence were transmuted by this spirit of kinship. The best example is that it never occurred to me to dine apart from the others. Godfrey Bristowe had said that the dining-room was such a total failure that even the cat refused to eat in it, but my decision not to dine alone had nothing whatever to do with the room's appearance. Instinctively, I had meals with Rosa and the Greys. It just never occurred to me to do anything else. Incidentally, there were no fixed rules: we had meals when we wanted them—not when some servant decided that the hour had struck. In the mornings, sometimes Rosa brought coffee and rolls to my room—and sometimes I took them to hers. I soon discovered how little it mattered whether she waited on me or whether I waited on her. Such considerations were without meaning in the house in Meridian Square.

All this was remarkable enough when regarded in the cool light of reason (which I was able to do only when alone), but what was far more extraordinary was the manner in which Rosa controlled my ever-increasing activities with the Mannerings and the Teasdales.

That is not easy to explain, and I do not know whether she was aware of the extent to which she regulated those complex activities. All I do know is that some time elapsed before I began to suspect that it was Rosa who decided whom I should see, or ignore, of the countless people who thronged round me—imagining I had influence over Christopher.

At the outset, I was totally unaware of this. Rosa often told me someone had telephoned, or called, and how she had explained that I was too busy to do anything about it. I accepted this procedure simply because there was something in her manner which made me accept anything she did. Later, however, I began to suspect that it was she who arranged all my meetings, although she was not present at any of them.

One afternoon, about a fortnight after the family council, I returned to the house soon after three o'clock to find Rosa in the hall.

"There's someone to see you—in the Yellow Room."

"Who is it?"

"Belinda."

"*Belinda!*"

"Yes. Why not?"

I stared at her.

"Why on earth should Belinda come to see me?"

"All sorts of people come to see you, so why shouldn't Belinda?"

After a pause, Rosa went on:

"You told me you passed her on the stairs—that day you went to Highgate with Rupert. She's probably discovered who you are since then—and wants your advice. Anyway, I told her you would see her when you came in."

I gazed at her for some moments, trying for the hundredth time to discover the secret of her unique appeal. There she stood—cool, fresh, fragrant—with her grandly poised head and her remarkable grey eyes. But her influence over me was not derived wholly from her beauty. Of that I was certain. Incidentally, others did not seem to find her extraordinary in any way.

"All right, Rosa," I said at last. "I'll see her. But why she has come—and what she imagines I can do for her—is a complete mystery to me."

Directly I entered the Yellow Room, I discovered that the wraith-like figure I had seen at Highgate *was* Belinda. I remembered how she had emerged from a room, just as Rupert and I were coming down the stairs, and had stood as if petrified till we had passed.

She rose as I entered, but was in a state of such fluttering excitement that some moments elapsed before she could say a word.

She was a fragile creature—dressed in odd, almost Victorian clothes. A glance told you that she was a stranger to the world and its ways. She must have been well over fifty, but her virginal air made her seem like a girl who had aged, rather than a woman who would soon be sixty. Her luminous child-like eyes contrasted strangely with her short silver hair: and her elfin features had the nervous tensity of a sensitive being, long accustomed to solitude.

An aura of seclusion invested her. It was easy enough to associate Belinda with the little green-and-white Highgate house, which peered demurely at the world from its prim privacy. I could easily visualize her standing in the narrow covered way, leading to the front door, listening to the twittering of the birds—and inhaling the warm fragrance of the wallflowers on the top of the old wall, which half-hid the house from the road. It was easy to imagine her in the small square hall, full of knick-knacks—or slowly ascending the creaking

period staircase. An atmosphere of lavender and old lace pervaded her as intimately as it pervaded the little Highgate house.

By now she had recovered sufficiently to make an attempt at speech.

"I—I know—Mr. Drake—that my coming to see you like this," she began in a quavering voice, "must—must——"

The stumbling sentence collapsed, so I attempted to come to her rescue, but she checked me with a quaint little movement of her hand. Then, having rallied her reserves, she said slowly but with perfect articulation:

"I know, Mr. Drake, that my coming to see you like this must seem very strange. But—but—I am in great distress. And I have no one to whom to go."

The tone was that of a frightened child and, to my dismay, I saw she was trembling.

"I'm very glad you did come," I said quickly. "Please sit down. Anything you tell me will not go an inch farther—and I will help you, if I can."

She sank into the chair I had moved near her, then sat leaning forward, her tiny feet scarcely touching the ground. I imagine she had not received any kindness for a considerable time, because her lips trembled with the effort of suppressing tears.

She waited till she could speak with the little air of dignity which so strangely became her, then said softly:

"How kind you are!"

The new deep tone of her voice was very appealing. In fact, one way and another, I was beginning to feel wholly inadequate to the situation. There are some people whose mere presence makes you aware of the essential quality of their lives—and Belinda was one of them. To be with her was to know what the chief characteristics of her life *must* have been. And it seemed odd, and pathetic, that such a life could have been lived in such a world.

But, realizing that the situation would collapse if I appeared nonplussed, I said confidently:

"There's no hurry. Tell me anything you want—in your own way."

"I do not know why you, a stranger, should be so good to me." Then she added, as if she were thinking aloud: "It's dreadful to have no one to whom to go. To wake in the night and not to be able to think of any one!"

Almost immediately, she went on:

"Before you can advise me, I'm afraid I shall have to tell you something about myself. But, if I do, please understand that it is not because I think I am of any importance. I know I am not. I often

say to myself: ' It does not matter what happens to you. *You* will not be missed.' "

After an impressive little silence, she said:

" My father was the Vicar of Mamley. I am an only child, and my mother died when I was very young. My father was everything to me. Everything! After his death, thirty years ago, I bought the house in Highgate. I have been there ever since. I think I can say I was happy, in my way."

She leaned her head to one side and gazed speculatively into the distance, as if she were deliberating whether the last statement were the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

" Mine was a very solitary life. But I took great interest in St. Michael's. That is the church I attended. Yes, I *think* I can say I was happy."

" And then Rupert Mannering turned up?" I asked.

Instantly, she became very agitated.

" Oh, Mr. Drake, I *beg* you to believe that I have not come here to say anything against Rupert! He is the most remarkable man I have met. And certainly the most spiritual."

Then, very timidly:

" *You* think he is very spiritual, don't you?"

I said I had met him only once.

That surprised her, so I explained briefly the circumstances in which Rupert and I had become acquainted.

" Please believe that I realize how much I owe him. Do believe it! He made me see how narrow I was—and how selfish. And—and how antiquated my religion was. He knew all about the new religions which are springing up everywhere. He said I must become dynamic. He told me all about those splendid young people who confess their sins to each other so freely and frankly. And about all kinds of esoteric societies. And how the end of the world had come. And how he was one of The Elect. And how I could become one too—if I did what he said. So I gave up going to St. Michael's."

She looked at me very earnestly for some moments, then she said softly:

" I prayed for guidance before I did that, Mr. Drake."

I did not know what to say, so I said nothing.

A moment later, she went on:

" Rupert was so dynamic and so spiritual that he did not know he was hurting my deepest feelings—hurting them terribly! I told him once that I could not sleep for thinking how deeply my father would suffer, in the other world, at the knowledge that I had left the Church of England."

"And what did he say to that?" I asked.

"He said—he said——"

She broke off—gazed at me with great frightened eyes—and at last managed to say:

"He said that if my father—who had been dead for thirty years—was still thinking about me, or the Church of England, he must be in that part of the next world which is reserved for nit-wits."

And then Belinda broke down and cried like a child.

Not knowing what to do, I patted her shoulder and told her it was no good upsetting herself like that. Somewhat to my surprise, and greatly to my relief, she responded instantly to this expression of sympathy—and began to dry her eyes with a handkerchief about as big as a postage stamp. I saw, however, that if I let her continue her story it would lead to another collapse, so I decided to take charge of the conversation.

"Now, you tell me if these are the facts," I began. "Rupert made you give him the house—and transfer all your investments into his name. Then——"

"Yes, yes! But all for the highest motives!" she interrupted.

"Never mind his motives. Let's stick to what he *did*. He became the owner of everything you possessed, and so you were entirely dependent on him. Isn't that it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But it sounds so crude when you say it like that. Everything, really, was on a high spiritual level."

"We won't argue about that. I want to remind you of what actually happened. Don't let's bother about motives, or high spiritual levels."

"But—but, Mr. Drake," she said earnestly, "*you* believe that Rupert is above worldly considerations, don't you?"

I did not answer immediately, because it was obvious that my reply would be a momentous one for her. She sat leaning forward—looking up at me as if I were an oracle.

At last I said:

"Rupert may be a new type of spiritual genius. He says he is—and he may be. I don't know. But there are plenty like him to-day. He may be more intellectual than most of the others, but I don't care tuppence about that. There are no end of Ruperts nowadays, and they are all adepts at getting the best of both worlds. Especially this one. They say that God is a millionaire—and they have every intention of becoming one with him. They tell you they are heralds of a new creed. They may be. But it's a creed which will produce neither saints nor martyrs."

Then, before she could say a word, I went on:

"What I want you to do is to contrast your present position with

the one you were in before Rupert converted you. You were independent. You had nothing to worry about. You lived your own life. Your house was your own, and your affairs were in your own hands. Or, rather, they were in Mr. Harold Teasdale's hands and——"

I broke off because she had risen, and was now moving about in a state of great perturbation.

"I ought to have told you that—that—you see——".

The sentence collapsed, so she waited till she had recovered sufficiently to say, slowly but coherently:

"I ought to have told you that I came to you, a stranger, chiefly because I could not go to Mr. Teasdale."

She made a weak little gesture with her tiny hands, then asked:

"Did Rupert tell you about—Mr. Teasdale?"

"He did. But I'd much rather hear your account of what happened."

"Perhaps you will be surprised to hear, Mr. Drake, that I know nothing whatever about business."

I said I was not surprised.

"Nothing whatever," she repeated. "For years and years, all my affairs were in Mr. Harold Teasdale's hands. I left everything to him. In the early days, he increased my income very considerably. Lately, of course, with this terrible threat of war hanging over us, he has not been so successful. But—but——"

"But you knew where you were with him?" I asked in order to help her out.

"Oh yes, Mr. Drake! He did everything he could to prevent me transferring my property to Rupert. Everything! He put every conceivable obstacle in the way. But, in the end, Rupert made me write *instructing* Mr. Teasdale to hand over my affairs. That was terrible. You see, all my life I have been to Mr. Teasdale when I was in any difficulty. And now—I can't go to him. I *can't*. It's—it's dreadful!"

She gazed into the distance—as if she were looking down an avenue of endless woes—then shook her head disconsolately. At last, she turned to me and said:

"You must understand that Mr. Teasdale was not merely my lawyer. I never thought of him in that light. He gave me such confidence. He made me feel that all the horrors of this dreadful age would be as short-lived as those of a nightmare. He's so dignified, so cultured, so assured. To see him—to listen to him—used to comfort me so much when I was worried about anything. And, now, when I am more worried than I have ever been, I cannot go to him."

Then, almost hysterically:

"I don't know what is going to happen to me! I don't know! And I daren't think!"

There was a long silence, then, to my astonishment, I heard myself say:

"You'll be all right."

This confident statement exorcised Belinda's fears as if it were a magic formula. She must have been one of those women—as numerous to-day as they ever were—who accept a positive assertion by a man, on a subject of which they know nothing, as if God himself had spoken.

Belinda passed from despair to serenity with a stride.

"I shall not worry any more now," she announced, as she began to put on her gloves. "Why should I? You understand these things, and you tell me I shall be all right. How kind you have been to me! How kind! I shall sleep to-night—like I used to sleep."

Then she added:

"How weak we all are, Mr. Drake. So often, recently, I have told myself that one must not take thought for the morrow, and yet I have been so worried—so dreadfully worried! But that's all over now. If only I could tell you how grateful I am to you!"

She would not hear of my going downstairs with her, but went on chattering gaily while she collected her bag, her umbrella, and various small parcels. Then, having adjusted her odd little hat, and having given her silver hair an encouraging pat, she flitted out of the room as happily as a child leaving for a Christmas party.

I do not know how many minutes passed before I realized I was alone, but, directly I did realize it, I felt like a blend of a fool and a criminal.

I had told Belinda that she would be all right! She was wholly dependent on Rupert—and I had told her she would be all right! She would be about as "all right" as a lamb with a ravenous tiger!

I ran to the door—raced down the stairs—and bumped into Rosa, who was crossing the hall.

"You're in a hurry," she said, rubbing her elbow.

"I'm so sorry, but I've *got* to overtake Belinda."

"Why? Has she stolen something?"

"It's serious, Rosa. She's in a desperate position, and I've told her she'll be all right. God knows what made me say such rubbish!"

"Well, why did you say it?"

"I had a hunch that she *would* be all right, but it was based on nothing."

"All hunches are based on nothing. If they weren't, they wouldn't be hunches. Don't you bother about Belinda. Let's walk round the

Square. It's a marvellous day and there won't be many more of them."

"But—but——"

"There aren't any 'buts'—it will be all right."

She took my arm and we went down the shallow stone steps into the sunshine.

CHAPTER VIII

Buck and Sir Michael

I

NOTHING reveals a man so clearly as the means he adopts to attain his ends.

I had ample opportunity to discover this fact, because every one of the crowd which now thronged round me was after Christopher's money. Each used different tactics but, in every case, the tactics employed revealed the tactician with microscopic clarity.

There were excellent reasons why Christopher raised such extravagant hopes in the hearts of his relatives and friends. In the case of most people possessing great wealth, the needy are forced to realize that there is a very slender chance of getting any of it. The methods employed in the amassing of most great fortunes plainly show that their possessors will know how to keep what they have managed to get. It is true that some give vast sums away, to a flourish of journalistic trumpets, but most of them retire behind barbed wire and defy onslaught.

Christopher's case was so different that it created hot hopes, not only in the hearts of the Mannerings, but in those of total strangers. Every one felt that Christopher's great fortune meant little to him. He had never touched it. Also, he was young. He might, therefore, be generous. And, above all, he was "mad." A multi-millionaire who was mad! No wonder that many an ardent hard-up spirit dreamed night and day of Christopher.

As this ever-increasing crowd of fortune hunters regarded me as the plenipotentiary of a fabulously wealthy madman, I soon discovered that I was a target for innumerable hopes—and a centre of countless intrigues. Understandable enough because, after all, this Vincent Drake had been chosen by Christopher to be his companion. An intimate relationship must exist between them. It followed, therefore, like the night the day, that this Vincent Drake must have great influence over the demented multi-millionaire. Hence, this Vincent Drake—of whom no one had ever heard—could be a potent ally.

So ran the logic of the fortune hunters.

Mr. Vincent Drake was courted, fêted, flattered.

From my point of view, all this was not lacking in irony. Only a few weeks ago, I had been sitting at a café table in the Place du Tertre

with ten pounds between me and suicide. Now, I represented Wealth in a money-crazed world. Vincent Drake had become a power. He had become a power because, for the time being, he was treated as if he were Christopher Bell.

I felt like a leaf that had fluttered into a maelstrom. Everything I had ever known was whirled away, so suddenly and so totally that the past seemed like a sleepwalker's dream. Every minute of the day, and half of the night, someone or other turned up, or telephoned, to ask me to lunch, or dinner, or a theatre, or a night club, or to spend the week-end in the country—or heaven only knows what! These whirlwind campaigners were chiefly the younger set, who, somewhat naturally, made the facile assumption that my idea of a good time must necessarily be theirs. There was no finesse about this crowd. They took me out—reeled off a graphic account of their highly complicated affairs—then asked me to " touch " Christopher as soon as I could for as much as I could. Because they were " in hell's own mess." Which was true enough.

Several of the girls—some of whom were relatives of the Mannerings I had met—offered me a generous commission if I could fix things so that they could have an affair with Christopher on his return to the land of the living. One said it would be thrilling to sleep with a looney. Another, called Helen—an attractive richly-curved blonde of about twenty, whose photograph frequently appeared in the illustrated papers—showed me her legs when I was driving her home in a taxi, so that I could commend her to Christopher with genuine enthusiasm. Another girl, who had been married for about a year, told me to " count that out "—as her husband was " all for it." In fact, one way and another, the emotional affairs of this set resembled those of a farmyard, and were about as interesting. But the desperate need of each and all of them was money.

The men either hadn't jobs or didn't want them. Their idea was to marry money. Most of the girls were sensation mad, and badly in debt. They lived at home, because it was cheaper, but their parents knew nothing about their lives, and probably preferred to know nothing, as they would not have been able to do anything about it if they had known. For this set, the Future was to-morrow, or this afternoon, and their implied philosophy was that nothing mattered very much—and that nothing was going to last very long. Practically every one of them had counted on a private income, but times had changed, so many of them now found that they would have to try to live on their wits. This crowd could have existed only in a great city—at a very late stage of its evolution. Its members were referred to in the popular press as " Play Boys and Glamour Girls."

A dominant figure in this end-of-the-world set was Buck Mannering—the mottle-faced Buck Mannering, who had worn such a remarkable tweed suit at the family council.

Buck was squat, almost square, and had the physical vitality of a bull. He must have been about sixty, but, in his own phrase, he was one of "Nature's favourites"—and there seemed to be no reason therefore why he should not continue his present mode of existence for another twenty years. To look at him—to listen to him—was to be reminded of what Arthur had said about the "Mannering sexuality" in the Place du Tertre, because Buck Mannering was a sexualist if ever there were one. He lived, moved, and had his being on the sexual level.

Actually, it was his blatant acceptance of this fact which interested me. From the outset, Buck revealed himself without the least vestige of reserve. He took his stand on sexuality, and did not care one damn who knew it. On more than one occasion he said to me: "Every one is like me—underneath. But I've got more guts. That's the only difference." It follows that Buck was a bachelor. He had a maisonette, over an empty shop, off Curzon Street. No one else lived in the building, for, as Buck explained, he needed privacy.

He elected to act as my guide through the particular London he knew so well, and, as there was a lot to be learned from him about the Mannerings and their friends, I accepted this arrangement. The result was that, for some weeks, I spent a considerable amount of time with him.

Women were Buck's quarry, and he had many hunting-grounds. One of them was the end-of-the-world set to which he introduced me. He called its members "The Amateurs"—and derived cynical satisfaction from the easy conquests they provided. It was not difficult to believe that a financially independent man of his type, with a total lack of scruples, would find good hunting in this hysterical crowd, who knew everything and understood nothing.

Late one night, in his large dimly-lit sitting-room—with a sofa the size of a bed in the far corner—Buck made his view of that crowd very clear.

"How street-women get a living to-day is what beats me!" he exclaimed. He then called off the names of ten girls I had met with him on our nocturnal expeditions. "That's ten of 'em. All belonging to good families. And every one of them dead easy. They think no more of having an affair than they do of shaking hands. And they imagine, because they know all the answers, that they understand the questions. And they are all hard-up—desperately hard-up. There never was such value to be had as there is with those smarties. They're

dead easy and—if you frighten them enough—they've no limits Now, take Helen."

Helen was the richly-curved blonde who had shown me her legs in the taxi.

After a prolonged pause, during which Buck lit a cigar, he repeated:

"Take Helen. I've known her family for years. Her father's one of my oldest friends. Damn it, I dine there every other week! She was deep in that crowd before she was eighteen. I waited—and didn't have to wait long. Soon, she just *had* to get money. And then she was easy as—that!"

Buck snapped his fingers.

"She had some damned silly schoolgirl limits then," he went on, "but she won't have them much longer. I threw her out because of them, but she'll come back soon. She's in a desperate jam his time. So she'll come back—on my terms."

"You say you dine with her people every other week?" I asked.

"Rather! Usually when she's spent the afternoon here. I like contrasting her afternoon attitudes with her evening ones. It provides a kind of mental cabaret during dinner. I never thought the day would come when you could have affairs with the kind of girls who used to come to tea with your sisters when you were a kid at home. It makes you believe in Progress."

After a pause, he went on:

"You see how the whole thing works, don't you? Every one has the jitters about war—every one is damned hard-up—and no one cares a curse about anything. Half the young men in families like Helen's are pansies. The other half are the super-schoolboy type, and are usually married, and are in one or other of the services. There aren't enough men to go round, of course, and the unmarried ones are all on the look-out for a rich old woman. So girls like Helen, who have been brought up soft, and are crazy for sensations, don't give a damn about anything. Their parents either don't know the kind of lives their daughters are living, or they prefer not to find out. Besides, most of the parents are playing hell in their own way, so, if they say anything, it's a case of 'Look who's talking.' So it's hush-hush all round. It has to be. And that suits me."

Buck rose and began to prowl up and down the room. The dim light seemed to emphasize the size of his barrel-like chest and the length of his immensely powerful arms. His whole manner implied that he regarded the conditions he was describing as entirely natural and normal.

He then gave an account of his past relations with Helen, which evidently differed little from those he had had with a dozen other

girls in her set. He next proceeded to give a richly detailed programme of what their future relations would be, when necessity made her abandon those " schoolgirl limits " which had caused him to break with her temporarily. It was all defined and definite—all ice-cold and logical—and it would all be carried out to the least and last detail.

He ended by saying :

" Helen is the living proof of how wisely the parents of a hundred years ago brought their daughters up. If instead of being spoilt by a soft, silly mother, Helen had had an old-fashioned governess, who had thrashed her soundly twice a week—where it hurts most and harms least—she wouldn't be what she is to-day. Still, it's not too late now. As she will discover."

But Buck's knowledge of the sexual underworld was not restricted to " The Amateurs "—whom he regarded as an amusing side-line. There was nothing he did not reveal—and no one whom he spared—in the long account he gave of the intrigues and aberrations of all sorts of well-known people. He knew every secret club and every hidden haunt. And although, naturally, I knew that all this kind of thing goes on in every great modern city, nevertheless, Buck's revelations made me realize the extent to which the perverse has become the normal nowadays.

But the social implications of his theme did not exist for Buck. Ideas about good and evil did not worry him. All he saw was a situation—a situation which he exploited systematically and ruthlessly. Buck was a gangster—an emotional gangster—and was therefore, in his degree, representative of his age.

Much later, on this particular evening, just as I was thinking of going, he switched the conversation suddenly by asking :

" Have you met Douglas or Ernest Mannering yet?"

" Not yet," I replied. " Is Douglas the one who was at Teasdale's office that day? The fellow with the big shoulders, who kept looking at his watch?"

" That's Douglas. The damnedest fool ever born, with the single exception of his brother Ernest. So you've not met them? Well, you will. But, remember, it's their wives who matter, not them. And don't you let those women—who hate each other nearly as much as their husbands do—don't you let them pull the wool over your eyes. And, if they're not enthusiastic about me, and they probably won't be at the minute, you can shut them up by saying that we ve had several intimate talks together."

He laughed, then added :

" Ask them if they like this room. That will quiet them. They've both been here, though each thinks the other hasn't. And, one day,

they're coming here *together*. They don't know that yet, but they are. After that visit, perhaps they'll be more friendly."

Buck dismissed the subject with a movement of his huge talon-like hands. Then he began to discuss the affairs of the world at large.

So far as I could discover, there was only one cloud on Buck's horizon; and only one person for whom he had a hint of respect. The cloud was his financial outlook: the person was Harold Teasdale.

These were related, as all Buck's affairs were in Teasdale's hands, so the one could not be discussed without frequent references to the other.

I gathered that although Buck had had an income of two thousand a year ever since he could remember, it had dwindled appreciably of late owing to the general fall in securities. That was bad enough, but the conditions in the political world ominously indicated that it would soon be worse. Hence the cloud on Buck's horizon.

"I'm not worrying a lot yet," he went on, "because Foxy Teasdale would diddle the devil himself any day of the week. He gave me marvellous tips in the old days. Why, soon after I went to him, I picked up a cool thousand through following his advice."

"I'd like to know what you think of him," I said suddenly. Then I went on. "In one way, I'd rather have your opinion about him than any one's."

"Think of him! Think of Foxy Teasdale! I'll soon tell you that. He isn't a man, he's a brain. I'll bet you there isn't one drop of blood in the whole of his lean body. Women don't exist for him. He's as sexless as a ghost. It's damned uncanny. But you can't tell him a thing he hasn't thought of. Not one! I'll back him to get my income back where it was—war or no war. If I didn't think that, I shouldn't like the outlook. Still, things always break right for me."

Then, as I rose to go, he said:

"I may be able to touch that lunatic Christopher, when he turns up. Though I'll be one of a crowd. I know that."

He looked at me quickly with his keen small eyes, then asked:

"Do you think Helen will have a crack at him?"

The question was so unexpected that I hesitated—and that hesitation was a good enough answer for Buck, who gave a great laugh.

"So she *is* going to have a crack at him! That's the best she can think of! That means she'll be turning up here soon. Suits me. We'll carry on—from just where she wanted to stop."

As I went down the stairs, his great laugh seemed to follow me.

II

One morning—during the early days of my brief association with Buck Mannering—I returned from a walk at about twelve o'clock to find a note from Rosa, telling me that Harold Teasdale had telephoned, and wanted me to ring him up when I came in. This interested me, for I had heard nothing from the lawyer since the family council at his office.

Mr. Harold Teasdale was full of apologies. He had been guilty of a regrettable lapse. When he had had the pleasure of meeting me, some weeks ago, he had omitted to give me Sir Michael Mannering's address. Sir Michael was, of course, the head of the family, and a very remarkable man. In many ways, a unique man. He lived at 9 Mortimer Square, Knightsbridge, and was usually at home in the mornings. Why he—Harold Teasdale—had forgotten to give me these particulars, he really could not imagine, but it was a relief to know that I had them now. Then, having hoped that I was well, Mr. Harold Teasdale hung up the receiver.

I decided that this was an effective way of indicating that I should have called on the head of the Mannering family, but it left me unrepentant. I found it difficult enough to deal with the Mannerings who pestered me all day and every day without running after those who left me alone. Nevertheless, on thinking it over, I decided that I ought to have called on Sir Michael, so I telephoned his house—talked with his secretary—and arranged to go round the next morning at eleven o'clock.

It was one of those June mornings which make you look forward to the winter. An east wind raged down the street and rioted at every corner. Pedestrians looked like refugees. A shroud-like sky mourned the death of the sun.

Depression deepened when I turned into Mortimer Square—to find myself confronted by huge barrack-like houses, practically every one of which was to be Let or Sold. And had been to be Let or Sold for years—and would be, till the place thereof knew them no more. Evidently a clause in the lease prevented the conversion of these barracks into flats, consequently their owners had removed the furniture—in order to escape payment of rates—and now the hatchment-like boards of estate agents sombrely announced the ghostly glories of each derelict house.

I pulled the bell at No. 9 and almost immediately the massive door was opened by a maid who was such a pleasing contrast to the day, and the Square, that I gazed at her gratefully. She reminded me

slightly of Rosa and, as I had never seen any one remotely resembling Rosa, I stared at her more and more intently.

"Are you Mr. Drake?" she asked at last, evidently realizing that I was not going to speak.

"Yes, I am."

"Come in, please. Sir Michael is expecting you."

I had scarcely entered a lugubrious hall, when a terrific commotion exploded on the floor above.

"Get out!" a remarkable voice shouted. "Get out—and stay out!" Then, even more vehemently: "And don't come back! Hang yourself!"

The maid, totally ignoring this disturbance, began to ascend the stairs leading to the scene of it. When we were half-way up, a fragile and frantic young man shot past us, muttering: "He's a monster! A *monster*."

The maid opened a heavy mahogany door, and announced:

"Mr. Drake."

I went in, but, seeing no one, I turned and looked inquiringly at the maid.

"Sir Michael's gone in there," she said, indicating a door communicating with another room. "He won't be very long."

She then began to pick up various letters and documents which had been thrown on to the floor, while I looked round with some interest.

It was a great oblong room, very high-pitched, with a huge open fireplace in which great logs were burning. Several armchairs and an enormous sofa were ranged near the fire—creating the effect of a smaller, more intimate, room within the room itself. The walls were adorned with prints and etchings, all of a sporting nature, with the exception of one, near the window, depicting a magnificent country house. There were two or three elaborate cabinets containing old china, and flanking two of the walls was a carved bookcase in which the classics, chastely bound in calf, still retained their long-preserved virginity.

In the centre of the wall, opposite the chimney-piece, hung the portrait of a dark aristocratic woman with finely-cut features and long narrow hands.

I was studying this so intently that I started when the maid said:

"She was Sir Michael's first wife."

Then, pointing to another portrait over the chimney-piece, she added:

"And she was his second."

I gazed for some moments at a Rubenesque blonde, then asked:

"Is she dead? You said she *was* his second wife."

"Yes, she died suddenly a few years ago. This is her daughter."

She picked up a photograph from a huge bureau near the window, and handed it to me.

"She's very lovely," I said as I returned the photograph. "Does she live here?"

"No. She married two years ago and lives in the country."

It is necessary to explain that this dialogue was punctuated by exclamations from the adjoining room—the most emphatic being: "Nincompoop!" . . . "Ninny!" . . . "Idiot!"

Then, suddenly, the door was flung open and a remarkable figure appeared.

A white-haired, pink-cheeked old man, with fiery blue eyes, a Wellington nose, and a powerful figure, stood in the doorway looking at us. His appearance had a Viking quality, despite the fact that he was wearing a dressing-gown and pyjamas, and held a long-stemmed brier pipe in his bronzed hand.

He swept me with a comprehensive glance, then demanded in his clear vibrant voice:

"Vincent Drake? Christopher's companion?"

Before I could reply, he turned to the maid and said:

"Has that ninny hanged himself?"

She went over to him, took his pipe—knocked it out and refilled it, then put it in the pocket of his dressing-gown.

"Sit here."

He sat in the chair she had indicated, whereupon she produced a comb and tidied his luxurious vital white hair. The docility with which this electric old man accepted these attentions was remarkable. Both seemed to have forgotten my presence so entirely that I felt like an invisible spectator.

"You don't listen to anything I say," she said in a low caressing voice. "You've done it again—and you promised you wouldn't. You promised faithfully—only yesterday."

"I tell you, Mary, it's that ninny—that jackass! Look!" He pointed to the letter-littered bureau. "I was dealing with those—every one of them asking for money—when that ape began to tell me about someone who had telephoned. Yes, he did!" the old man shouted. "It's his fault!"

"It's your fault."

He said nothing, so she repeated:

"It's your fault."

"Yes, it's my fault, Mary."

She passed her hands over his hair, as if he were a child, then she said:

"You won't shout the place down talking to Mr. Drake?"

"No, no! You go, my dear, you go!"

She went out and the old man began to stride up and down the room, snapping his fingers and talking to himself. As I watched him, I understood why the fragile and frantic young secretary had referred to Sir Michael as a monster. There was something overwhelming about the vitality of this volcanic old man.

I had no time to study him, however, for he came to a sudden standstill, swept me with another glance of his fiery blue eyes, then announced in the tone of one making a discovery:

"You don't look like a liar."

I said I was glad to hear it, then asked if he had expected me to look like one.

"Of course I expected you to look like a liar! All my confounded relatives said that your account of how you became Christopher's secretary, or companion—or whatever it is—couldn't be the real one, so I thought you'd look like a liar."

"What I told them was true enough. I've never seen Christopher Bell, and I know nothing whatever about him. What possible reason could I have for lying?"

"Now, you listen to me, young man. What was I going to say? Yes, yes, I remember! I know only two things about Christopher. One is that he has brains and physical courage. And that's rare—devilish rare! And the other is that he helped me recently when I was in the devil's own fix."

"It would interest me to know how," I said almost involuntarily.

"Wait a minute!"

He went to the door, opened it, and shouted:

"Mary!"

A minute later she came into the room.

"I've lost my pipe," he announced in an aggrieved tone.

She took it out of his dressing-gown pocket and handed it to him.

"Ah, there it is! Thank you, my dear, thank you."

Directly she had gone, he turned to me.

"This is how Christopher helped me. But, first, you tell me this. Do you know anything about domestic difficulties in this country nowadays?"

I said I did not.

"Well, take cooks," the old man shouted. "Only *cooks*. How many cooks do you think I've had in the last few months?"

I said I had no idea.

"Fourteen! *Fourteen*. I've had a Czech woman, a German, a Swiss, an Austrian, a Slovak, and an Hungarian. Would you believe

that the ninnies hadn't taken the trouble to learn English before they came? Then I had an Irishwoman, who went mad and said she had lost the kitchen range. Then I had an English lady, who was a Communist, and who wanted to be a proletarian, so she became a cook. She set the kitchen on fire—and is now in a nursing home, where she pays ten guineas a week. Anyway, damn the cooks! I wanted someone to look after *me*. I couldn't find any one. Tried everywhere. Then I wrote to Christopher. I was desperate. And he sent Mary. Where he found her, God only knows! But I like her about the place. I couldn't get on without her. You've got to understand that I'm on the threshold of old age. I'm damned nearly eighty."

Then this incalculable being went to the door again and shouted:

"Mary! Eleven-thirty! Hot!"

He turned to me and said:

"I always have rum and milk at eleven-thirty. Hot, when it's cold. Cold, when it's hot. Have some?"

I said it seemed a good idea to me.

This reply delighted him. He rubbed his hands with immense satisfaction, then shouted downstairs:

"Mary! *Two!* Hot!"

"Nothing like rum, young man. Nothing! It goes to every part of your body, shouting 'Hallo!' I've had rum and milk every morning since I was out of the cradle. Always had it at Selby. Used to have it in the billiard room with my sister Magda. I can see Magda now, stretching up her fat little hands to take the glass off the billiard table. She could only just reach it. Then she held the glass in both hands, and sipped her rum and milk slowly—looking at me with great, dark, earnest eyes."

He stared into the distance for some moments, then said softly:

"You were a very great person, Magda. A very great person, my dear."

He turned to me and went on:

"Dead before she was twenty-two. Died suddenly, but she knew she was going to die. She came into a fiver a week when she was twenty-one—and she made a will, and left the money to me. What d'you think of that? I've always kept that money in my own hands. Harold Teasdale handles my affairs, but not her money. Nearly sixty years since Magda died. Yes, nearly sixty years."

After a silence, he added:

"It's a queer thing that the Lord can create beings like Magda, but He doesn't seem to be able to keep them alive. Whereas a blackguard like my brother Buck goes on living for ever."

I think he would have elaborated this theme if Mary had not appeared with the rum and milk.

Now, I suppose it's just a trick of memory, but, whenever I think of Sir Michael, I see him as he was then—in dressing-gown and pyjamas, his long-stemmed brier in one hand, and a glass of hot rum and milk in the other. And whenever I think of Mary, I see her standing opposite the white-haired, fiery-eyed old man, looking up at him—her lips compressed to restrain a smile, her eyes shining with affection.

She tied the cord of his dressing-gown, in a manner which suggested that she performed this service twenty times a day, then left us alone together.

Almost immediately Sir Michael plunged into a long account of the trials and tribulations he endured through being the head of the ever-expanding Mannering family. He showed me letter after letter, picked haphazard from the bureau near the window—every one of which contained a request for money. He went on to explain that he had so many brothers and sisters—and was related to so many Teasdales—and had so many nephews and nieces, most of whom had families of their own, that he was damned if he knew whether half the letters he received came from relatives or strangers.

At last he flung a pile of letters on to the floor, then turned to me and shouted:

"Do you know what's the matter with all these people?"

"No—what's the matter with them?"

"They won't face facts, sir. The country won't face facts. The whole world won't face facts. We all want to stick to the standards of living we're used to. Well, it can't be done. We've got to alter. We've all got to alter. And I *have* altered."

He broke off, to take a great gulp of rum and milk, then went on:

"I've given up Selby, haven't I?"

Then, seeing that this conveyed nothing to me, he explained that Selby was his country house in Devonshire. "That's Selby," he said, pointing to the print near the window. "I was born there: my father was born there: and my grandfather, and my great-grandfather. All the Mannerings have been born there. The place is part of my being—it's part of my blood. And now it's shut, bolted, and barred. It's mortgaged to the chimney-pots. The terraces are overgrown. The Broad Walk is covered with weeds. There isn't a horse in the stables. Don't talk about it!" he shouted, as if I had introduced the subject. "Don't talk about it! I dream of it every night. Yes, every night, confound it!"

He paced the room furiously two or three times, then stopped by me and went on:

"And all these ninnies think I have money to spare! The whole world is money mad. That's the result of your damned mechanical age. Every one is ruined—and every one is money mad. I tell you again: we've got to alter. We've got to become simple and sane. We've got to scrap this confounded machinery. I said that to a fellow at dinner the other night, and the jackass replied that you couldn't put the clock back. I said: 'Why not? The clock's stopped—so you can do what you like with it.' That's what I told him."

He emitted the low growl of an enraged lion, then continued even more vehemently:

"And now I'll tell you something. You can only run a country with people like me. Wait a minute!" he shouted, as if I had interrupted him. "When I say people like me, I know they'll have to have more brains than I've got. I know that. I'm not a fool. But they've got to have my kind of blood. If a man has brains without my kind of blood, it's a calamity—for him, and every one else. If you don't believe that, you have a good look at that secretary of mine. What's the good of brains with the blood of a rat?"

He finished his rum and milk, then asked:

"Have another of these?"

I must explain that, being unaccustomed to hot rum and milk in the morning, I was now feeling like a kettle rapidly approaching boiling point, but, seeing that acquiescence would give the old man pleasure, I replied that I would like another very much.

He shot to the door like an arrow.

"Mary! Two! Hot!"

"She's the only woman I'd trust to mix it. I taught her—and she follows instructions. That's rare in a woman—devilish rare!"

When the rum and milk had appeared, and Mary had left us, he began to stride up and down the room again, discussing subject after subject, making pronouncements on each with unabated vigour. The range of the old man's speculations was remarkable, but it was the more personal revelations which interested me particularly—and notably one of a very intimate nature.

"I'm glad I had the sense to be born in 1859. Thundering glad!" He rubbed his hands at the memory of this feat of foresight. "I've no regrets that I'm nearly eighty. But what infuriates me is that my confounded family expect me to die soon. What do you think of that?"

I said it sounded fantastic to me.

"Of course it's fantastic! Why, God bless my soul! directly

Harold Teasdale and I have got my affairs into order, I shall marry again. I've got to marry again. I've got to have a son. D'you think I'll let my brother George be the head of the family? That ninny—head of the family! Eh? I shall marry a young woman, and I shall say to her: 'Now, no daughters! A son. You understand? A *son.*' That's what I shall say to her."

I asked if his relatives were aware of these marital intentions and, if so, were they enthusiastic about them.

"I tell them nothing. Of course I'm going to marry again. I know quite well what they'll say when I marry a young woman. They'll say it's the Mannering sensuality. That would be true about Buck, but it will be a lie about me. It's natural, confound it, when a man's left a widower—and is beginning to look round for the last time—to spend his days with a young woman who is beginning to look round for the first time. Besides, I want someone who hasn't any memories. Old people have too many memories. I've too many. I've reached the time when every stick and stone—every lane and every street—seems to say: 'Remember?' I get so damned muddled. I keep thinking some friend is alive when he's been dead for years. No, no! A young woman with ardent blood, who will give me a son. Then I'll think about dying. I suppose a man can die when he likes!"

He knocked out his pipe indignantly, threw another enormous log on the fire, then turned to me and announced:

"I like women and I do not mind who knows it. When I look at some of the young men you see about nowadays, I cannot believe they were born of woman. They never even glance at the loveliest girls. I'll be damned if I understand it. Wait a minute! I'll show you something."

He went into the adjoining room, returning almost immediately with two photographs.

"She was my mother. Now, I never read a book, but, years ago, old General Cummings came over to me in the smoking-room of the club, with a book in his hand—I think it was by a fellow called Hardy—and said: 'Michael, I've just read a damned good remark in this novel.' So I asked him what it was. I can't remember the exact words, but it was to the effect that one of the women characters in the book was the type who is essential to high generation. Well, my mother was that type. That's why Magda was born."

He held out the other photograph for my inspection.

"Is she Magda?" I asked.

He nodded his head, still looking at the photograph.

"She was very lovely," I said.

"You were a great person, Magda, my dear. A very great person."

He took my arm and led me to the chimney-piece. Then he pointed to the portrait on the wall opposite.

"She was my first wife."

Again I studied the dark aristocratic lady, then he turned me round and said, pointing to the Rubenesque blonde:

"And she was my second. Now, wait a minute!"

He went to the bureau and picked up a photograph.

"And she is my daughter. Married, and lives in the country. That's because she's my blood in her veins. Any one who lives in a great city goes mad. Well, you see? I've had beautiful women in my life. There was a young and a beautiful woman at my cradle—and there's going to be one at my grave."

Then, having indulged in a long, complicated complaint against most of his relatives, he swung round and said:

"I like a woman about the place. When I come in from hunting, or when I come back from the club, I like to find a woman in the house. I like to be with one of these creatures who bring us into the world. I don't care if she talks nonsense. Most men talk nonsense too. But the nonsense a woman talks is different. It's more restful. Besides, women are generous—if you are generous to them. I like them, and I need them. I like their voices, and the way they move, and their physical refinement. I admit that most of 'em are a damned nuisance travelling, but you have to put up with something. I like their courage in having children. I like their clothes. And I like their bodies. And I do not care one damn who knows it. Bar a thoroughbred horse, I should say that the body of a beautiful woman is the loveliest thing on earth."

The indefatigable old man went on and on, pausing only to relight or refill his pipe. The whole room resounded with his voice and, when he shouted, the china quivered. His ardent positive nature knew nothing of compromise. He took his stand on his instinctive opinions, and backed them to the limit. It is not surprising, therefore, that he thought little of political leadership in England.

"We've ceased to produce men at the top. That's the fact. You can't run a country with men who look like sanitary inspectors, and who talk like sidesmen making a report to the vicar. The men in the Services are all right; the common men are all right. But those Appeasement ninnies are no damned good to any one."

As he seemed to expect some comment on this statement, I asked if he thought there would be war.

"Of course there will be war. And a very good thing too. Then the ninnies won't count. I was through the South African War, and enjoyed it very much. I was out again in 1914. They said I was

too old, but I soon stopped that nonsense. I was hit in the shoulder. Of course there will be war! Do you think this country can go on like this? There's leadership in England when there's war—and only when there's war. This country is united in war—and only in war. The English must remain the rulers of the world—because they are still the greatest people in the world. That's the dreadful fact. For it is a dreadful fact. If the English are the greatest people in the world—and they *are*—it tells you what the others must be like."

He elaborated this contention at some length, then, as it was nearly one o'clock, and as I had an appointment for lunch, I rose and said that I must go.

"Come again, some time—and have some more rum. Perhaps it's as well you've got to go, because I've got the devil's own day ahead of me. That fellow, Harold Teasdale, is coming this afternoon. There's a life. Eh? I tell him he's a dead man, bar his brain. How is it that fellow gets through the work he does? And do you know that he gives his professional services to several well-known charities? I don't believe the damned fellow ever gets to bed."

I shook hands and was on my way to the door when he cried:

"Wait a minute! When Christopher turns up, tell him I don't want anything out of him. But I do think he might let me send him all these begging letters. Tell him that. Any idea when he's going to arrive?"

"None whatever."

"They'll be after him like a pack of hounds when he does—which is what most of them are. Well, come again, some time."

Mary was in the hall. She helped me into my overcoat, then, just as I was about to ask her something, the old man shouted from the floor above:

"Mary!"

She looked up at me, laughed, then turned and ran upstairs.

CHAPTER IX

Conversation at a Cabaret

THE London of 1938 was a world of rumour, crises, depression. 1938, of course, was a year of ever-tautening tension—which culminated in Peace in Our Time, and a colossal armament programme—and the reactions to this tension were many and very revealing. Probably the chief was an orgy of talk which must have been unique in history.

Everywhere the possibility of war was discussed endlessly. Every one had Inside Information—which every one told every one else to keep under his hat. And there were countless prophets who knew—Definitely, for a Fact—that cataclysmic events would happen on a stated date at four o'clock in the afternoon. Spiritualists shouted that there would be No War. The Pyramids proclaimed that there would be No War. Astrologists trumpeted that there would be No War. And Hitler's horoscope brought the same glad tidings to the initiate.

Nevertheless, despite these happy auguries, the newspapers were full of articles about war, and people discussed them daily. Actually, every one talked about everything—endlessly, excitedly, hysterically. Compared with the London of 1938, the Tower of Babel was a Trappist monastery.

Meanwhile, apart from the armament industry, trade had reached a standstill. The Stock Exchange was stagnant. The shadows of Uncertainty lengthened and deepened over Europe. Faith in the future had dwindled to ghostly dimensions—and yet, paradoxically enough, every nation was living on the future.

It is understandable therefore that some people, whose lavish scale of living was dependent wholly on dividends, sent money abroad, or bought gold, in a frantic attempt to transform the menacing grin of the future into a welcoming smile. But the general reaction to the nightmare state of uncertainty was a determination to have as good a time as possible till the inevitable crash came. And it was through meeting a set of people with this outlook that I met Douglas Mannering.

One night a young man whom I scarcely knew, called Archie, turned up at Meridian Square—told me that he had a table at The Tabarin—and practically begged me to go with him. Archie was a feminine youth, marvellously attired, whose master passion was the ballet. Whenever the ballet was mentioned, a strange light came into

Archie's eyes, and he began to talk with remarkable volubility in a completely incomprehensible language. Apart from the ballet, he was lank, listless, and rather lily-like. He lived with his mother—whom he described as a " dear decorative darling "—and he had a tiny private income. Why he had suddenly descended on me, and why he insisted that I should go to The Tabarin, which represented everything he loathed, were mysteries so deep and so dark that I accepted his invitation chiefly in the hope of solving them.

The Tabarin was a large circular building at which elaborate " Cabaret-Revues " were staged during supper. People sat at the numerous tables, devoured course after course, watched the show, then danced till all hours. This " All-In " type of entertainment had proved very popular, consequently the place was pretty crowded when Archie and I arrived about a quarter of an hour before the show was due to begin.

On broad lines, it seemed to me that the audience could be divided into two types: People from the suburbs, who had come to see a " Parisian " show: and business men who were entertaining their associates with a joviality, and a prodigality, which suggested that their respective firms were paying the bills. There were clouds of tobacco smoke: a buzz of conversation: and a horde of harassed waiters, who had to make their weary, heavy-laden way down narrow aisles between closely-packed tables.

In view of subsequent developments, it was rather odd that I soon became interested in a somewhat numerous party at a table near the one at which Archie and I were seated. Possibly this party was somewhat conspicuous in that it consisted of a number of young men rather like Archie; a bullet-headed man, evidently the host, who looked as if he had just emerged from an alcoholic trance, or was about to enter one—and a very *décolletée* woman of about thirty, who talked incessantly without glancing at the person addressed, and who kept changing her attitude abruptly directly the attention of the men at adjoining tables showed any sign of diminution. It may have been the covert admiration of the men near her—covert, because most of them had formidable ladies of their own—which first attracted my attention to her. Or it may have been the conversation of two men at a table nearly touching ours, one of whom asked his companion: " Just what is that woman doing in that bed of pansies?" To which his friend replied that he knew a bed which would accommodate her more suitably. Or words, roughly, to that effect. But very roughly.

Just before the show began, certain events happened so swiftly and

so surprisingly that I found myself in a situation very different from the one I had expected.

The first was that Archie suddenly rose and informed me that he positively could not witness the opening number of the revue. He just couldn't! He had seen the show before, and the opening number stank. Just—simply—*stank*. And he wasn't prejudiced. Positively not! He often experienced a rich rhythmic reaction to the lascivious, but noxious normal nudity literally lacerated him. It did really! So, if I didn't mind too dreadfully much, he'd drift away till the debauch was over.

As I didn't mind too dreadfully much, Archie drifted away.

Now, a few moments after he had disappeared, a number of things happened simultaneously. The orchestra started the overture: the waiters began to serve supper: and the *décolletée* woman crossed to my table and seated herself opposite me.

Almost before I realized she was there, she had explained that she was Iris Mannering—and that she had adopted this unorthodox way of making my acquaintance because whenever she had called at Meridian Square I had been either out or engaged. So she had told Archie to bring me here—and then vanish—in order that we should meet.

She explained all this in a husky, casual voice, while she scanned the adjoining tables in order to discover whether change of position had diminished her appeal value. As some time elapsed before she was fully reassured, and as she continued to talk, I was able to study her at leisure.

She was about thirty, with startled blue eyes, and a full, very indecisive mouth. Someone had done a good blonde job of work on her hair. Actually, however, she created a blur of impressions, rather than a dominant one, because every physical trait was so emphasized that they all clamoured for attention simultaneously. Everything vied with everything else: blood-red nails, scarlet lips, languorous eyelashes, dazzling teeth, synthetic hair, half-bare breasts. Someone ought to have told her that you can't emphasize everything. As it was, you couldn't just look at her. You had to set forth on a Cook's tour. And even then you never reached the end of your itinerary, because she kept exhibiting new attractions. She would jump up suddenly—lean over the back of her chair to talk to someone—and so you discovered her luxurious hips. Or she would cross her legs carelessly, and you discovered super calves in super stockings. There was no end to her. So much so that it was quite a while before you appreciated the exciting contrast between her black dress and her extraordinary white skin.

She took it for granted that, if you were a man, you were immensely attracted by her. If you did not seem enthusiastic, she assumed your indifference was technique. I am certain that, if I had slapped her face, she would merely have thought that I used apache methods because I had proved them to be the most successful. Iris made the absolute assumption that if you were a man you must be crazy about her. It did not matter what you did, or what you said, or whether you did and said nothing. It did not matter whether you were just out of the cradle, or nearly in the grave—if you were a man, you could not resist Iris Mannering. That was her creed, and she kept looking at the tables near us for evidence in support of it. And I must admit that she found plenty.

It was unnecessary for me to say much, as her conversation was as non-stop as her charms, but at this point talking became impossible because the orchestra played fortissimo as the overture neared its end.

I welcomed her silence because it enabled me to recall the various odds and ends I had heard about Iris Mannering and to make some attempt to fit them into a pattern.

The first fact which presented itself was that this woman was Douglas Mannering's wife. It seemed incongruous that Iris was the wife of the big-shouldered man I had seen at the family council. I remembered how he had scanned his companions with angry eyes, and the way in which he had kept looking at his watch. I also remembered that, just before he had left, he had thrust back his chair so violently that it had fallen to the floor with a crash—and he had given a great shouting laugh before he almost ran out of the room.

But my actual information about her came from Buck, and consisted of scattered remarks made on various occasions. One way and another, what he had told me was roughly as follows.

She was the daughter of a manufacturer in the Midlands, and had married Douglas Mannering presumably because he was a Mannering. Iris had had social ambitions in the cradle. According to Buck, her parents were only too glad for her to marry any one, which was the reason why they had accepted Douglas as a son-in-law although he had not a shilling. They were wealthy people and had made a generous marriage settlement on condition that Iris and Douglas lived in London. That did not prove to be the end of her, however, for, soon after two children had been born—a boy and a girl—it became evident that Iris had no vocation for motherhood, consequently the children were being brought up by their grandparents.

"You know the type," Buck had said on one occasion. "When she was a flapper she was always falling in love with her riding-master, or the chauffeur, or her brother's tutor. Her people were in

a panic if she were half an hour late, or if they did not know exactly where she was at every minute of the day. And marriage didn't alter her. Not that I mind her being that way. Suits me. But what I can't stand are her confounded poses. She'll suddenly go maternal—have the kids home—and stage a Radiant Motherhood stunt for about a week. Only to impress some man, of course. And she's always discovering she has a Mission of some kind. Pansies are one of her Missions. She says she's reforming them. Actually, of course, she uses them for camouflage—which must cost her quite a bit. Anyway, she doesn't pose for me. At least, not morally."

On another occasion Buck said:

"Don't miss Douglas. He's rich. He falls for the pansy-reform pose, and so he half-thinks Iris is faithful to him. The jealous will believe anything except the truth. And Iris knows it. Douglas is a masterpiece of jealousy, so they have the most frightful rows. He'll murder her one day. That's certain. I wonder he hasn't already."

These remarks, and a number of others, came back to me as I sat opposite Iris, waiting for the overture to stop and the show to begin. I knew that Buck always thought the sexual worst about every one, but, having met Iris, it did occur to me that possibly Buck had exaggerated less than usual.

But at this point the overture ended.

The opening number was entitled "None But The Brave Deserve The Bare." It was an allegorical affair. Nude show-girls did a kind of ritualistic homage-dance round a pedestal, on which stood the highly stylized figure of an airman—who received this adoration with marble impassivity.

Iris watched this for some minutes, then turned to me and said, huskily and patronizingly:

"Tell me about yourself. Who have you met? I know you saw Arthur in Paris, but I mean since you came to England."

"Well, Rupert Mannering met me at——"

"So you've met that little reptile, who lives on the mad Belinda! How tiresome for you! Who else?"

"Godfrey Bristowe, the artist."

"That queer creature who lives in the Bostock Road! Very odd! Who else?"

"I shall have to think. I've met so many. Anyway, here's another. I met Sir Michael a few days ago."

"You don't have much luck, do you? I suppose he told you how he'd had to give up Selby, and all that nonsense?"

"Is it nonsense?"

"Of course. He has heaps of money. Not enough to keep up

Selby in the absurd way he used to. He was too proud to cut down, so he shut the place and now pretends he's a pauper."

Almost immediately, she added :

" He's such a boisterous bore. Who else have you met?"

" Buck Mannering."

She discovered that someone was waving to her from a nearby table, so I did not hear her opinion of Buck.

It was some minutes before conversation was resumed. It wasn't too easy to talk, for the show made certain demands on one's attention: supper was being served: and people were getting more animated. Also, Iris kept looking round to make certain that the airman-adoring nude girls had not seduced the attention of her admirers. In addition to all this, the bullet-headed man at the table she had deserted indicated by his expression that he was aggrieved, and it was not until Iris had given him one of her special smiles—which he evidently regarded as a promissory note—that he returned to his former trance-like condition.

On the whole, I welcomed silence. In fact, as I continued to watch her, I almost came to the conclusion that she made a mistake to speak at all. While she sat silent, half-naked, preening herself—receiving homage and distributing largesse—she had a super-personal value. Every courtesan is a world figure, because desire is universal. But, when she speaks, she loses this symbolic significance. She destroys the illusion she creates. She narrows to her own personality which, frequently, is meagre enough.

But there were other reasons which made conversation unnecessary. It was quite clear why Iris had contrived this meeting. She had contrived it because she knew I had seen her husband at the family council, and she guessed I had heard about her from people I had met, so she was piqued by the fact that I had not called on her. She wanted to know Christopher's companion—to fascinate him—in order to have an ally when Christopher appeared.

Probably conversation would have recommenced sooner than it did if it had not been for an elaborate balancing act now in progress on the stage. The executants were a very numerous Japanese family. The father—a man of colossal torso—was lying on a table. On his chest stood a ladder which was held upright by his gorilla-like arms. On almost every rung of this ladder a member of the family was perched in a fantastic posture, and, on the upper rungs, a veritable bouquet of young girls blossomed in entrancing attitudes while they juggled with an incredible number of silver balls. If the prostrate giant who held this Ladder of Life had wearied of supporting his family, the young girls would have been hurled on our heads. Iris

and I watched the turn therefore with some interest. Efficiency triumphed, however. One by one the performers glided gracefully down the ladder. Finally, the whole family linked hands, and made profound obeisance to the Honourable Westerners—who were gazing or gulping at the various tables.

"Difficult to talk, isn't it?" Iris asked.

I replied that it was, and I might have added that it wasn't too easy to eat, owing to a succession of blows received from hurrying harassed waiters.

"It's difficult to talk," she repeated. "Where had we got to?"

"Buck Mannering."

"Oh yes! Who else have you met?"

I gave her a long list of names which ended with that of Harold Teasdale.

"Marvellous, isn't he? But quite inhuman."

She glanced at the stage, then added:

"Very dull, but the next thing is more exciting. It's a kind of ballet."

She went on talking about men and women I had met. She was interested only in people, and only in her relation to them, consequently everything she said had a very narrow reference.

Soon, however, another interruption occurred and a somewhat enigmatic one.

She suddenly broke off in the middle of a sentence to stare at a man who had just seated himself at a table near ours. He was a determined-looking individual of about fifty whom the waiters treated with great deference. Directly he saw Iris, he rose, came over to us, then stood silent for some moments, gazing down at her with a half-amused, half-contemptuous expression.

At last he said:

"Well?"

"It was impossible—quite impossible."

"Nonsense!"

"I tell you it *was*!"

"When won't it be?"

She did not reply, so he repeated the question.

"I can't talk about it now."

"Then come over to my table."

Iris rose unwillingly, made her excuses—said she would not be long—then left me.

I looked round. The place was now crowded and noisier than ever. But the chatter died down to some extent when the curtain rose on one of the high-spots of the show.

This was a spectacle entitled "Davy Jones's Locker"—and took place, therefore, on the bottom of the sea. The setting was fairly effectively indicated by greenish lighting, gauze, and a backcloth on which were depicted coral reefs, monsters of the deep, and an enormous Triton blowing his wreathed horn. The music, too, suggested dark profundities.

After an impressive pause, Davy Jones emerged from a chromium locker. The nearly naked Davy, having exhibited himself in a number of exciting attitudes, suddenly whirled like a top—paused—surveyed the scene—then whirled again. After which he stretched suppliant arms towards the Triton on the backcloth.

This prayer was answered immediately, for numbers of show-girls invaded the scene—attired only in mermaids' tails—who circled seductively round Davy Jones, exhibiting their charms to his critical inspection. This went on for quite a time but, eventually, Davy had to choose. Instantly, the atmosphere became vibrant. The music dwindled to a tom-tom tensity. A greener light suffused the scene.

Suddenly Davy made a panther spring—and clutched a coy blonde. This young lady, having given a series of exultant leaps, removed her mermaid tail—in order to prove that Davy had not slipped up on his selection—and was then dragged by her hair into the chromium locker.

Tumultuous applause—during which a waiter fainted. Then Iris returned and announced that she wanted champagne.

Although she attempted to present her former nonchalant manner, I saw she was very agitated. She lit a cigarette—put it out—and looked at her watch three times in as many minutes. When the champagne arrived, she drank two glasses rapidly, then leaned across the table and said in a tone somewhat different from her usual one:

"When you meet my husband, I don't want you to tell him that I spoke to that man."

"You're very certain that I'm going to meet your husband."

"I am certain. Don't argue. You'll meet him, and he'll tell you all sorts of nonsense about me. I don't mind that, but I don't want him to know I spoke to that man."

"I shouldn't be able to tell him—as I don't know the man's name."

"I didn't introduce you on purpose."

Almost immediately, she added:

"Do something for me, will you?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Go over to my table—and bring Archie here. Tell him it's important."

I collected the protesting Archie, who was about to go home, and

took him over to Iris. Whereupon a conversation ensued to the effect that, after the show, Archie was to take her somewhere, and to wait till she was ready to go home. He began to protest, but was told that—if he did what she wanted—she'd consider what they had discussed yesterday; but, if he didn't, that was the end of it. And now he was to go and explain to Bevers why she had had to forsake him—and to tell him that she would come next Sunday.

Apparently Bevers was the bullet-headed man at the table Iris had deserted, for, on leaving us, Archie went over to him and remained with him till the end of the show.

These arrangements having been made, Iris looked round in order to re-establish her dominion over her numerous admirers. Nevertheless, I noticed a new expression in her eyes, and she seemed to breathe more rapidly.

She began to give a long account of the trials and tribulations she endured as a result of her husband's jealousy, but had to break off abruptly owing to the demands of a new number in the show.

A regiment of girls were not only dancing the can-can, but were emitting excited yells as they did so. The stage was a riot of flying skirts, black-stockinged legs, bare thighs. The longer the dance continued, the more abandoned it became, till, at last, with a final backward fling of innumerable flounced skirts: a final posterior view of innumerable frilled beribboned drawers: and a final exultant yell, the dance ended—to the rapturous applause of the audience.

Iris asked if I liked the can-can, and I replied that I did in moderation. She then gave a number of reasons why it bored her, but I fancied that the chief one—which she did not mention—was that she had looked round frequently during the dance, only to discover that the attention of her admirers was riveted to the stage. The can-can, on mass-production lines, had seduced their allegiance.

By now, one way and another, I had had enough of these festivities. The heat, the tobacco smoke, the babel of conversation, began to be wearisome. I had been tricked into this outing, and I had had enough of it.

At last the show came to an end. It ended on several patriotic notes, for the final spectacle was entitled "England, Home, And Beauty." The can-can girls reappeared as bronzed athletes, in shorts, and sang a song in praise of the Keep-Fit movement. Davy Jones reemerged as The Spirit of Modern Youth. The mermaid of his choice now represented The Spirit of Modern Motherhood. A shapely Britannia stood defiantly against a Union Jack, with trident poised to prod aggressors. Meanwhile show-girls, wearing disdainful smiles, and a few square inches of silk, strolled through the audience—distri-

buting flowers to those revellers who had champagne buckets by the side of their tables.

The National Anthem was then played, after which Iris announced that as she did not want to dance we would all go home.

A few minutes later I found myself in the foyer with Iris and her party—and the determined-looking man, who had joined us directly the show had ended. In due course his car appeared. Iris, Archie, and he got into it—and were driven away.

The others went in their turn, so I found myself alone.

I stood on the pavement for nearly ten minutes, glad to breathe the night air. Then, just as I had decided to walk to Piccadilly Circus, a man lurched round the corner—came up to me—and asked if the show were over.

I recognized him at once, but before I could speak he said thickly:

"Aren't you Vincent Drake?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good! Bloody good! Remember me? Douglas Mannering!"

CHAPTER X

Monologue in "The Rat-Hole"

BEFORE I realized what was happening I found myself walking down an alley with Douglas Mannering, who was the last person on earth I would have chosen to meet at this particular moment. Evidently he had been drinking fairly heavily, for he lurched into me more than once, and muttered to himself repeatedly; nevertheless he threaded his way through a succession of back streets without any serious difficulty.

Once he stopped under a street light, caught hold of my arm in a way which made me swing round and face him, then almost shouted:

"She was there, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was there," I replied.

"With Purvis?"

"I didn't meet any one called Purvis."

"Who did she leave with?"

"With Archie—and another man."

"Archie!"

He gave his great shouting laugh, then we went on again till we stopped outside a deserted-looking house which had no sign of animation other than a murky yellow light at the bottom of almost invisible steps leading to the basement.

Having told me that this was The Rat-Hole, Douglas descended the steps, knocked on a door, and a few moments later we entered a square hall in which a number of overcoats and hats were piled on benches flanking the walls. A curtain hung over the narrow entrance to a room in which people were dancing to the strains of a very scratch orchestra.

Having signed a book, produced by a flaccid individual in grotesque evening clothes, Douglas waited till the music stopped, then pulled the curtain aside and beckoned me over to him.

We faced a large, very low-pitched, oblong room in which a number of nondescript men and women were returning to little tables ranged round red-distempered walls, ornamented with drawings in white chalk. Evidently an entertainment of some kind was about to begin, for some waiters were pushing a small circular stage into the middle of the room.

"Oh my God!" Douglas exclaimed. "Now they're going to start

their damned show! I'm so sick of naked women. D'you want to see 'em?"

I said I'd seen enough for one night.

"Come on, then!"

He began to cross the room, somewhat unsteadily, taking no notice of two or three men who shouted a greeting as he passed. Just before we reached an aperture leading to a smaller room, he seized an aged waiter—ordered some drinks—then turned to me and said:

"It's quieter in here, damn it!"

We went through a half-concealed door and entered a slip of a room containing a few small tables, none of which was occupied as every one had gone into the big room to watch the show. There were no windows—only a couple of small ventilators—consequently the place reeked of stale tobacco smoke, and the atmosphere was not improved by the heating arrangements, which consisted of a large oil stove fastened to one of the walls. Newspapers or dominoes were strewn over the tables and the floor was littered with cigarette ends.

Soon after we entered the room, the waiter brought a couple of whiskies which he placed on a corner table. A few minutes later, the scratch orchestra in the next room began to tune up in readiness for the first turn.

We sat opposite each other for some minutes without exchanging a word. Douglas kept taking a pull at his drink, in the joyless manner of a man who drinks solely for the effect, while he stared in front of him with angry eyes—so intent on his own thoughts that I believe he was only half-aware of my presence.

Not only was he extremely powerful physically, but an aura of violence surrounded him, and it was easy enough to see that this man would have no limits once he had lost control of himself. So, for many mixed reasons, I was not eager to be cross-examined by him about Iris.

Suddenly he threw his cigarette on the floor, leaned across the table and said:

"You wonder why I brought you here. I'll tell you why. I like you. See? Liked you ever since you told 'em off at that rattlesnake's office in Lincoln's Inn. You told 'em you wouldn't talk about Christopher as if he were mad. Remember? I liked you from that moment. Always know whether I like people or not—straightaway! No! Wait a minute!" he shouted, as if I had interrupted him. "Give you an example. Two hours ago, I went into The Red Star. New barmaid. Liked her. Told her I liked her. What do you think she said?"

"I've no idea."

"She said: 'You're not so bad yourself.'"

His great laugh echoed through the room, then he repeated: "Not so bad yourself," three or four times, while he stared at me with eyes which seemed to be looking at someone behind me.

"Meant to pick you up long ago," he went on, "but I've been in a daze for weeks. Yes, a daze—damn it! But, to-night, I went to Meridian Square and hammered on the door till a girl opened it."

"Rosa!" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Absolutely, old boy! She was rosy with sleep. 'Where the hell is he?' I shouted. And she said you'd gone to The Tabarin. Yes, gone to the bloody Tabarin! Well, I knew *she'd* gone there with that bastard Bevers. So I came along. You said she wasn't with Purvis?"

"I didn't meet any one called Purvis."

"And *she'd* better not meet him! She gets all that's coming to her if she does. And that's plenty. Finish that drink!"

He rose, lurched over to the door, and opened it. A turn was in progress on the circular stage, but he ignored it and shouted:

"George! Same again!"

A few minutes later the waiter shuffled in with two drinks on a tray.

Douglas stood surveying the old man for some moments, then he said: "Come here, George."

George obeyed mechanically. He was a pitiable object with his bent knees—and a face that looked like a map of trials and tribulations.

"See that girl out there, George, doing a strip-tease?"

"I didn't notice."

"You poor old bastard, you're too damn' old and too damn' tired to notice. They wouldn't pay *you* to do a strip-tease, George. They wouldn't dare watch you do one. You doing a strip-tease would make even God cry."

Then he added:

"Go and get yourself a drink—and a long one."

"You're always very good to me, Mr. Mannering."

"No one's ever been good to you, George. No one—ever! I've second sight when I'm drunk, and I can see the whole of your life. And it's bloody awful, old boy, it's bloody awful!"

The waiter shambled off—and Douglas returned to the table and picked up his glass.

If a man goes on fighting long enough, he probably runs into a punch that makes him groggy; and if a man goes on drinking long enough, he reaches the drink that rocks him to the heels. And the whisky which Douglas Mannering was now swallowing had just that effect.

He sagged over the table, stared at me stupidly, then said jerkily:

"Listen to me, d'you hear? You—listen—to *me*. Tell you something. Tell you something—never told any one."

Then, explosively:

"Tell you story of my bloody life!"

Some men keep their word when they are drunk, and Douglas Mannering certainly kept his. For the next three hours he talked like a man in delirium. Efforts to silence him were as unavailing as attempts to leave him. The fact that I was a stranger and, therefore, knew nothing about him, provided an excuse for telling everything—and tell everything he certainly did, without the least regard for chronology or reticence.

I have heard a good many life-stories, but this was an orgy of self-revelation. I am convinced he had only the haziest idea of his surroundings and that, eventually, he had little conception of my identity. He did not hear the orchestra in the next room—and was unaware of the silence when it ceased to play. He talked on and on like a man possessed, and I had no alternative but to listen.

A full account of Douglas Mannering's passionate outpouring would fill a book and, if that outpouring were set down verbatim, a large part of it would be incomprehensible. What follows, therefore, is only the ghost of the monologue to which I was forced to listen in The Rat-Hole.

The one element which gave this monologue the least semblance of coherence was Douglas's repeated references to his jealousy of Iris. Heaven knows he meandered through a hundred other subjects, but, sooner or later, he reverted to the theme of jealousy—often in the most disconcerting manner imaginable.

In the middle of some chaotic tirade, on a subject miles remote from Iris, he would stop abruptly—look at his watch—then shout:

"What is she doing now? At this actual bloody minute! What is she doing *now*?"

On one occasion he made the waiter telephone in order to find out if Iris had returned home; but the only information George could bring him was that he had been unable to get a reply. He waved the waiter away, then plunged into a rambling account of his childhood.

"My mother deserted us. Know that? Married Alastair Bell and—deserted us. Absolutely! I was brought up by an aunt. A bitch, old boy—a thoroughbred bitch. Brought me up and my brother, Ernest. Know Ernest? Well, meet him. I say—meet him! Ernest's a gentleman. D'you know what a gentleman is? He's a fellow who manages to forget all the dirty tricks he's ever done. That's a gentleman. Ernest's a gentleman. I'm not a gentleman. You a gentleman?"

Then followed an interminable harangue about it being essential—if you were a Mannering—to be a " crawler."

" Even as kids we had to crawl, old boy. No money. No prospects. See? Had to crawl round uncles and aunts. Aunt who brought me up—left Ernest two thousand quid a year. Left me—nothing. Couldn't crawl, old boy, couldn't crawl."

Then, with scarcely a pause, he plunged into a long theory about certain people who were destined for the gutter. According to him, no matter how they struggled, they had to go to the gutter. If you were a " gutter-soul," to the gutter you would go. God couldn't stop it. And he, Douglas Mannering, was a gutter-soul. Absolutely!

After which he shouted to George for another drink.

But what goaded him to a paroxysm of fury was the belief—evidently held by a number of people—that he had married Iris for her money.

" It's a lie. D'you know that? Damnable lie! I'd have married her anyhow. Married her—if she'd been on the streets. Her money—nothing to do with it. D'you believe that?"

I said I believed it.

Then followed an almost incomprehensible account of money difficulties, and a complicated explanation of how they had managed to break Iris's marriage settlement some years ago, with the result that Harold Teasdale had invested the proceeds so advantageously that they had managed to avoid bankruptcy. But, now, their position was more desperate than ever. Iris flung money away, and yet—somehow—she always managed to find funds when the bailiffs were about to come in.

Then he began to rave about the children, whom he never saw. He kept saying he was certain her parents prevented the children from meeting Iris. Someone had told them lies about her. Every one lied about her. Every one!

" Think I don't know what they say about her! Of course, I know! You wait a minute! Tell you something!"

He shouted to George for yet another drink, then went on :

" Think I don't know she goes about with all sorts of men? 'Course I know! All sorts! But she doesn't sleep with 'em. See? Most of 'em pansies. Listen! Tell you the truth about her. She's vain. Damned vain—but she's not vicious. That the word? I've discussed it all with Buck Mannering. Know Buck?"

I said that I knew Buck.

" Man of great experience. Wouldn't trust him—if he weren't a relative. He agrees with me. See? Says she's vain. But I've told her—I've told her that if I find her out, I'll do her in. I will—as sure

as my name's Douglas Mannering. My name *is* Douglas Mannering, isn't it?"

I told him it was.

"Very well, then. As sure as my name's Douglas Mannering. Tell you something. You wait a minute."

He tried to light a cigarette—failed—then he flung it on the floor and said:

"You can hate a woman and love her at the same time. Know that? Yes, you can! No good saying you can't. I hate her just as much as I love her. Just as much! If I do her in, I'll die of remorse. If I don't do her in, I'll die of jealousy. Absolutely! Now—tell you something else. Something damned funny, old boy. Damned funny!"

Suddenly he half-rose, leaning heavily on the table, and shouted:

"Why have they stopped that lousy orchestra?"

I told him it had stopped an hour ago.

"Hour ago? Hour ago? What the hell d'you mean—an hour ago?"

I explained it was now four o'clock and that the orchestra had stopped playing over an hour ago.

"Four o'clock! You don't mean four o'clock? Get that bastard, George."

I went to the door and called the waiter, who, apparently, was the only person in The Rat-Hole besides ourselves.

"Ring up my damned home, George. Ring it up! See? And don't tell me there's no reply. Four o'clock!"

A few minutes later George returned—and reported that he had spoken to Mrs. Mannering, who said she had been in for a long time, and who did not seem best pleased at being disturbed.

For some reason this information convulsed Douglas. He laughed till he was breathless, but at last managed to say:

"Not—best—pleased—at—being—disturbed! She doesn't want to be disturbed. That's bloody rich, that is. *She* doesn't want to be disturbed! No good living in this age if you don't want to be disturbed, old boy."

Then he went on:

"But she's in! See? She's *in*. She only went to a club with that pansy Archie. Been in a long time. That's what George said, wasn't it?"

I told him George had said just that.

"Now, you listen to this. Teach you something. D'you know that if I weren't jealous of her, I wouldn't want her? Know that? Sometimes, when I think of her body, I feel sick as a dog. Abso-

lutely! I hate it—and I hate her damned clothes too. Bait on a hook! But, an hour later, I burn for her—just like a chestnut hopping about in hell."

Almost immediately, he added:

"It's Purvis. See? If I find her with Purvis, I'll do her in. I know what he likes. D'you know what Purvis likes?"

He proceeded to tell me in considerable detail what Purvis liked, then went on to explain that Iris had promised—promised faithfully—not to be alone with Purvis again. Buck had told him to make her promise that. Purvis was too degraded even for Buck. Buck had said so, and Buck wasn't squeamish. Buck was always telling him he was a fool not to thrash Iris good and proper—and regularly. Buck had given him a lot of advice.

Then he explained that although he had affairs with barmaids that wasn't infidelity. That was different. Quite different. He only had affairs with barmaids when he was damned miserable. And he was always damned miserable. But, if Iris thought that, because he had affairs, she could have them—she damned well couldn't. It was different. She was a mother, and he wasn't. Any one who said he was a mother—was a liar.

"Tell you this too. They say I live on her money. Well, what did they ever teach me? The only thing they tried to teach me was to crawl, old boy. And I couldn't learn to crawl. See? Couldn't get the knack of it. Sweated blood trying to learn. Sweated blood! Absolutely!"

He shouted to George for a whisky, then said with dramatic emphasis:

"For Christ's sake, get some money out of Christopher for me! I can't go on like this. Tell him it'll end in murder."

George appeared with a whisky-and-soda, which Douglas finished in two gulps—then passed right out, and slid to the floor.

The waiter and I stared at him for some moments, then I said:

"What do we do with him now, George? Shall I get a taxi and take him home?"

"No, sir. I shouldn't do that. He's ugly when he comes round. I can put him up on a sofa here. It's not the first time I've done it—and it won't be the last."

We carried him to a room, little bigger than a cupboard, wrapped him in a blanket, then made him as comfortable as possible on a broken-down sofa.

A few minutes later I gave George a pound, then left The Rat-Hole.

Dawn had broken and the exquisite morning air was a caress.

For some weeks the weather had been vile, but soft shimmering sunlight, and the blossoming beauty of the sky, heralded a radiant day. A day of sudden magic—the lovely repentance of a bad English summer.

As I walked through the gradually awakening streets, I felt I had emerged from an involved dream. There are moods in which it seems odd to discover that the familiar aspect of things remains unchanged, and this mood now possessed me. I did not think of anything as I walked slowly back to Knightsbridge, exulting in the glimmering sunshine and the gaiety of the intermittent breeze.

When I turned into Meridian Square, I was not in the least surprised to see Rosa walking towards me, as if she had known that I should return at this precise moment and had come to meet me. Far from being surprised, it seemed inevitable she should be there, hatless, in a light summer dress—strolling through the slanting sunlight, the breeze rippling her hair.

But perhaps I was a little surprised when she put her bare arms round me and kissed me. Then, having gazed at me with eyes shining with amusement, she asked:

"Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"You're very lovely, Rosa."

"Have you *enjoyed* yourself?"

"I feel I've just come out of an involved dream."

"That's exactly what you have done. Still, you're putting up a marvellous show. Much better than I thought you would."

"I don't know *what* I'm doing, Rosa."

"That's grand. And very necessary—at present."

"All I know is," I went on, "that I live in such a whirl with all these people that I haven't time to think about anything. I'll give you an example. Weeks keep passing, and I hear nothing of Christopher. I haven't a guess when he will turn up. He's a complete mystery to me, and I never have time to give him a thought."

"That's all right. Everything's all right. Do you know what we are going to do now?"

"I never know what I'm going to do with you."

"You can do anything you like. Anything—at any time. I've told you I should always obey you. No woman could offer you anything that I would not give you."

"You *are* crazy, Rosa!"

"Of course I'm crazy," she said proudly. "And so are you. Now we'll go to the park. We'll go to the park and have coffee and rolls under the trees."

"I'd give a lot to know why it is that, when you suggest coffee and

rolls under the trees, it seems the most marvellous thing to do in the whole wide world."

"That's because you love me—and I love you. Come on!"

"You realize I'm in evening clothes?"

"What's that matter? Let's spend the day together. I haven't seen you for ages."

"What shall we do?"

"Go to Kew Gardens or Richmond Park. We'll lie on the earth and gaze at the sky. Or you can sleep with your head in my lap. Come on! There aren't many days like this. To-night there's a moon—so we'll have supper in the garden."

She took my arm and we began to walk towards the park.

CHAPTER XI

Two Mysterious Visits

I

ONE September afternoon I returned unexpectedly to Meridian Square at about three o'clock. My return was unexpected because I had lunched with Ernest Mannering and had arranged to spend the afternoon with him. I entered the house quietly, then, having waited in the hall for a few moments on the chance of seeing Rosa, I went slowly upstairs. I had not been well for a few days and perhaps that was the reason why I moved slowly and quietly.

As I ascended, it suddenly occurred to me that it seemed almost a lifetime since I had climbed these stairs for the first time with Godfrey Bristowe. I remembered how he had taken me first to the Yellow Room, then to Christopher's, and I also remembered how—after he had asked whether I liked the off-white carpet, the black furniture, and the red-lacquer writing-desk—he had said:

"I thought it amusing to have the bedrooms identical—with that rather girlish Yellow Room between them."

Bristowe's personality became very real to me, and I wondered how he had fared since he had left town for that cottage in Suffolk.

When I entered the Yellow Room, I noticed various letters were strewn over my desk and that one or two had fallen to the floor. Then, hearing a movement in Christopher's room, I assumed Rosa was in there, so I sat down and waited for her to appear.

I was not a little surprised, therefore, when the door of Christopher's room opened stealthily and I saw—Rupert Mannering.

We must have stared at each other for some time, but, despite my surprise, I soon realized that this was a changed Rupert from the one who had driven me to Highgate on the day of my arrival in England. Then, he had been icily self-assured. Now, he was very disturbed.

He began a jerky explanation to the effect that he had rung the front door bell several times without result, so had gone round to the garden and—finding the back door unlocked—he had come upstairs, knowing I should turn up sooner or later.

I said nothing—with the result that the tension became more taut. I believe Rupert was embarrassed by the fact that he had to engage in a conversation for which he had not prepared. Evidently he was one of those highly conscious persons who always arrange their meet-

ings in advance—and who always rehearse what they are going to say.

When the silence had become deafening, he suddenly asked:

"You've been lunching with Ernest, haven't you?"

This question was a mistake, from his point of view, for two reasons. It showed he had ascertained my movements before he had come to Meridian Square and—as my return had been quite unexpected—it revealed that Rupert had had good reason to count on my being out for the whole of the afternoon.

"Yes, I lunched with Ernest," I replied. "Why did you come here?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why?" I repeated with some emphasis.

"To—see you."

That was not only a lie, but a bad one. He flushed angrily as he said:

"What's it matter why I came? These silly details bore me."

"I'm sure they do. Well, what do you want to see me about?"

"What about? Why, about—Belinda."

He uttered the name as if it had been pulled out of him by a corkscrew. Actually, of course, he did not want to discuss Belinda or any one else with me. He had counted on my being out, and he had hoped to find a hint of the date of Christopher's return in some letter on my desk. That was why Rupert had come.

"And how can I help you about Belinda?" I asked, not without a secret fear that she might have been unwise enough to tell him about our meeting in this room.

"Well, I shall have to think. It's—it's not easy to explain."

While I waited, I again contrasted this pale, nervous, hesitating Rupert with the superman who had taken me to the green-and-white little house in Highgate. Something had gone very wrong with him since then. That was certain. And I felt that his chief problem at the moment was to evade telling me what it was.

"She always was a ridiculous person," he said at last, with an attempt at his normal manner. "But, lately, she has behaved in a most peculiar manner, which is extremely tiresome."

"What sort of manner?"

Rupert writhed. This cross-examination was purgatory to his pride.

"She's—well—she's becoming very independent. In fact, impertinent. And—and she's taken to singing at the top of her frightful voice all over the house."

"That's certainly odd," I said, "because she seemed subdued enough—that day I was with you at Highgate. Assuming, of course,

that it *was* Belinda we passed in the hall as we were leaving the house."

But Rupert totally ignored these remarks.

"Sings at the top of her frightful voice," he repeated, as if he could not believe what he was saying. "And that's not all."

"Not all?"

"No. She seems to be losing her memory. And, the other day, when I was telling her about the spiritual state of Europe, the ridiculous creature began to laugh. I simply do not know what to do with the demented virgin."

"I don't see that she's any problem."

"Not a problem! My dear good man, she's a very acute problem."

"I don't see it. If she's tiresome, all you have to do is to give her house back—and her investments—and get rid of her."

"What! After all I've done for her?"

"Yes—after all you've done for her."

"That's simply grotesque!"

He began to stride up and down the room, pushing aside everything that impeded his progress.

This certainly was not the Rupert who had patronized me at Highgate with his theories about the world situation. Outwardly, there was little change. His appearance was still precise, and his fair long hair was still somewhat lifeless, but the very intelligent light-blue eyes no longer regarded the world with cold detachment. They had a worried expression, and this accentuated the impression of immaturity created by the birdlike features and the narrow pointed chin.

Externals, however, did not reveal the essential change. It was the spirit animating him at Highgate which had suffered eclipse. Nothing now suggested that he regarded himself as a genius of an entirely new type. He was evidently at grips with an actual problem in the material world—and had haunting fears about the issue of the conflict.

Suddenly he stopped near me and asked:

"When's Christopher coming here?"

"I've no idea."

"You must have some idea!"

"I haven't any."

"He's left Beulah Island!"

"So that letter from Dr. Fordyce says. It came this morning."

I pointed to one of the letters on my desk.

"Well," he almost shouted. "That means he's coming here, doesn't it?"

"Does it? I don't know."

"I've got to see him directly he arrives. D'you understand that? Directly he arrives! And don't you let Belinda come here and tell him a lot of lies."

"I shall do what I'm told to do. I'm a paid servant. Just why do you imagine that I shall be able to influence him?"

"He'll listen to you. He didn't make you his companion for nothing. I'm going now. And I'm counting on you."

He collected his hat, stick, and gloves—then went rapidly out of the room.

A quarter of an hour later, the telephone bell rang.

I recognized Belinda's voice before she told me her name.

After explaining that she had not troubled me since our meeting, because there had been no need, she said it had occurred to her—some weeks ago—that it would be a good idea to regain control of her property.

I told her it sounded a grand idea to me, then asked if she had revealed it to Rupert—and, if so, had he given it a rapturous reception?

She replied that she had given Rupert a hint, but as his reaction had been so lacking in enthusiasm, she had decided to telephone me in order to find out whether I could suggest an approach to him which might be more productive.

I said it might be worth while to write to Mr. Harold Teasdale, suggesting he should take the subject up with Rupert. I pointed out that the lawyer would have no legal power over him, but, nevertheless, I had a feeling that Mr. Harold Teasdale would make the very best use of any other weapons he happened to possess.

I added that, should the lawyer induce Rupert to return her property, it would be as well if she kept it in her own hands.

Belinda burst out laughing, then assured me she had every intention of running her own affairs in future. Then, having told me she was perfectly happy, she hung up the receiver.

II

Three weeks later. . . .

One Friday afternoon about four o'clock, the door of the Yellow Room opened and Rosa announced:

"Mr. Harold Teasdale."

I had not seen the lawyer since our conversation in his private office after the family council, so I was somewhat surprised by this informal call.

He was as elegant as ever in his superbly fitting morning coat and, again, I was impressed by the imperturbability of his features and the atmosphere of isolation which invested him.

He did not look at me on entering. He was watching the departing Rosa. When she had vanished, he turned to me and said with silken suavity:

"That young person is not wearing an apron or a cap. Do you not—I only suggest this—do you not think that is a mistake? Everything in this house should be as normal as possible—with a view to inducing normality in Christopher."

"If you think that, I'm afraid you will not approve of his room. Come and have a look at it."

We went into Christopher's room and the lawyer regarded in turn the off-white carpet, the black furniture, the red-lacquer desk.

"Inappropriate, Mr. Drake, most inappropriate! Everything except antique furniture is an abomination. A very repellent room!"

"Mine is just like it."

"Very repellent!" he repeated. "Godfrey Bristowe is responsible, I believe. Have you heard from our artistic and eccentric friend since you lunched with him and spent the evening at his flat in the Bostock Road?"

He returned to the Yellow Room, without waiting for a reply, seated himself in an armchair with his back to the light, then made a number of seemingly haphazard references to people I had met.

His remark about the afternoon and evening I had spent with Godfrey Bristowe had been unexpected, as I knew that Bristowe had no relations of any kind with Teasdale, but I soon discovered he knew much more than this. He knew all about my first meeting with Rupert at Highgate—my association with Buck Mannering—my conversation with Sir Michael—my visits to The Tabarin and The Rat-Hole. In fact, he seemed to have intimate knowledge of all my movements during the last few months, though why he disclosed this knowledge was a complete mystery to me.

Actually, however, the sound of his unique voice, the little deprecatory movements of his white hands, the statuesque quality of his attitude, all combined to create an almost hypnotic effect. You began to listen to his voice—not to what he was saying. You no longer looked at him—you only felt his presence. He seemed to take possession of your whole being.

This was so to such an extent in the present instance that I am convinced I should have agreed with anything he had suggested, if an interruption had not occurred.

This interruption was caused by Rosa, who suddenly opened the door and asked if I had rung. I told her I had not, and she went away—leaving me in full possession of such faculties as I possess.

I felt that this incident irritated Teasdale, because he instantly became more suave and more studiously courteous. Anyhow, at this point, I gave a hint that it would interest me to know why he had come to see me.

" That can be stated very briefly, Mr. Drake. I am in a position to recommend a most profitable investment to you."

Realizing that I was about to speak, he raised his hand.

" One moment, please. It is an amusing fact that I am unable to recommend this investment to scarcely any of my clients, owing to their total lack of liquid resources. It is so, I assure you. I betray no professional secrets when I tell you that almost all the people you have met recently are continually pressing me to realize capital. In fact, I know you are aware that Buck Mannering—and Iris and Douglas—and Ernest and Ethel—and even Sir Michael are all in need of funds."

I said I was aware of it.

" Believe me, Mr. Drake, much of my time is occupied trying to persuade clients not to realize their investments. There has been a catastrophic drop in security values—occasioned, in my opinion, by psychological factors rather than material ones. But, whatever the cause, the fact remains. To realize investments at the present moment is an error—a cardinal error. I weary of saying to clients: ' Reduce expenditure. Wait! Sanity and prosperity will return.' I weary of saying that, Mr. Drake, especially to the Mannerings, who have been used to having everything they want for the last three hundred years."

Again, I made an attempt to speak and, again, he raised a restraining hand, rather in the manner of a conductor.

The Voice now attained its full orchestral quality—so there was no alternative but to sit back and be overwhelmed by its god-like prodigality.

"Let me anticipate the objections which I see you are about to urge against investing in the security I have in mind. Perhaps I should say the difficulties you envisage, rather than actual concrete objections. And the main difficulty—I suggest—that presents itself to you is lack of capital. If so, let me assure you that is not an insuperable obstacle. Far from it. I know the manager of the bank at which you have an account——"

"Mr. Quiddle?" I interrupted.

"Mr. Quiddle. Quite an admirable little man, in his way. I was with him yesterday, on a matter of some importance, and I have no doubt—none whatever—that if you should decide to invest in the security I have in mind, Mr. Quiddle would willingly allow you an overdraft to the extent of five hundred pounds at least."

Again, his white hand was raised to restrain me from speech.

"One word more. I think it possible you have heard from others that, frequently, I have recommended investments with productive results to the clients concerned."

"Certainly. Practically every one has told me how much they owe to your financial advice. But the point is: I do not need any more money."

"Do not need any more money, Mr. Drake?"

"No. Please do not misunderstand me. I do not underrate the value of money. I knew the lack of it for too many years to do that. And, if I had any one dependent on me, it would be different. But I haven't. I am alone. I have all the money I need. More than I need. So much so that I've given away a good proportion of the salary I receive."

"Given it away, Mr. Drake?"

"Well, lent it. Which is precisely the same thing. Nevertheless, I appreciate your motive in suggesting this."

He dismissed the subject with an elegant movement of his hands, then the mellifluous Voice filled the room again.

On this occasion, however, I did not listen. I knew I was incapable of detecting Teasdale's motives, but I was equally certain that altruism had not prompted his offer. That offer was in the nature of a bribe, probably not in the worst sense of the word, but a bribe none the less.

I decided that, if I were right, Teasdale's technique was masterly. Since the date of the family council, he had not proposed a meeting between us. He had foreseen that the people I should meet would try to use me for their own purposes, with little regard to my interests, whereas his first move had been to suggest a transaction from which

I should derive substantial benefit. He certainly was an adept at creating a unique background for himself.

But he had done more than this. He had guessed that I lacked the capital necessary to avail myself of his offer, and had therefore sounded Quiddle in order to ascertain whether an overdraft would be available should I desire one. Incidentally, the fact that he approached Quiddle—which he had no authority to do—proved one of two things: either he had influence over the manager, or he had realized that Quiddle was a super-flunkey. Anyway, Teasdale had been on safe ground because Quiddle had told me, at our first meeting, that should I require an overdraft at any time, he would be most happy to arrange it. Most happy!

When I became aware of what Teasdale was saying, I discovered he was discussing a subject wholly remote from me and my affairs.

"The times are complex and difficult, Mr. Drake, and those complexities and difficulties are reflected in the many demands of my many clients. Still, happily, even to-day, there are certain negotiations which are not unlit by humour."

I said I was glad to hear it.

"I have one on hand at the moment, Mr. Drake. I can give no details, of course, but, I assure you, it affords me the liveliest satisfaction. And for many reasons. It concerns a young man over whom I can exert no legal pressure. From the point of view of the law, I have no power over him. None whatever. And yet a client of mine—a somewhat wayward and eccentric lady—has asked me to induce the young man to do certain voluntary acts. As I lack legal weapons, I have to employ psychological ones. And—will you believe me?—I am inclined to think that, in time, I *shall* persuade the young man to do what the lady wants."

I said I believed him.

There was a long silence, during which it occurred to me that the lawyer had guessed it was I who had sent Belinda to him—and that his offer to me was not unrelated to this fact.

"One point before I go, Mr. Drake. Think over what I have said and, if you change your mind, as I've no doubt you will, telephone or send me a line. But this I beg of you. Say nothing about my suggestion to any one. Otherwise, all my clients will pester me to raise money so that they can invest in the venture I have in mind."

"You can count on me to say nothing."

"Thank you. I have told you, I think, that I am usually at my chambers during week-ends. Next Wednesday I have to go to Paris for a few days, but only for a few days. So come round if you want

to consult me. And, before long, you probably will want to consult me."

As he made this last remark, he looked straight at me for the first time. Usually, Teasdale's eyes were half-shrouded by heavy lids but, on this occasion, I encountered their full glance. The effect of so doing is not easy to describe. It was rather like discovering that you were on the verge of an abyss, when you had been certain you were standing on a kerbstone.

As he rose, he said:

"Still no news of the date of Christopher's return?"

"Still no news."

"Really? How very odd!"

Then, seeing that I was about to go down with him, he exclaimed:

"No, no, Mr. Drake! I would not dream of disturbing you. You have many letters, I see, awaiting your attention."

He looked disparagingly round the Yellow Room.

"Not what I could have wished. Very far from it. And Christopher's room, by any standards, is unfortunate—most unfortunate."

When he reached the door, he turned and said:

"Do not forget the little matter I mentioned about the maid. A detail, but not a negligible one. Normality is the note needed here. Normality!"

And then he went.

I lit a cigarette—and thought things over.

Ten minutes later, I decided that the most remarkable fact about the whole interview was the manner in which Rosa had interrupted it.

I went into the hall and called:

"Rosa!"

"Yes! What is it?"

"I never rang the bell—so what on earth made you come to the Yellow Room?"

"I had a hunch."

"Only a hunch?"

"Only! A hunch is the most important thing any one can have. Before long, I shall have one after another—all day long. So will you. Then we'll get somewhere. Come down, and we'll have tea."

"All right. I'll come down."

CHAPTER XII

A Letter from Godfrey Bristowe

A Thatched Cottage in Suffolk.
October 1938.

DEAR V. D.,

I have written you thirty simply enormous letters, and destroyed every one of them, because I know you have no time in which to write to Mr. Bristowe. But, having just had the brilliant idea that I need not give my address, I can now write reams—which is not only a comfort, but a dire necessity, because I must "be" with someone for an hour or two.

I have heard quite a lot about you since that marvellous May day when we sat in the garden and Rosa brought those heavenly fruit drinks—and I told you the terrible story of the fearful old beggar with the tin whistle in the Bostock Road. (I'm still convinced he is a projection of Mr. Bristowe's soul, but I simply dare not go into that!) Oddly enough, I've heard about you from that much-too-attractive person, Arthur Mannering. He has written me several times from New York and once from Washington. He gave more details of his meeting with you in the Place du Tertre—and he said he had had several notes from you, simply telling him the names of the people you were meeting. I adore getting letters from Arthur. Nevertheless, I wish he wouldn't write. He disturbs Mr. Bristowe quite dreadfully. Once upon a time, my heart had so many soft spots for him that it was practically putrid.

Of course, I do not have to tell you that I was raving to spend the summer in England instead of going abroad. The weather has been as ghastly as the political news. (By the way, wasn't Munich fun? I mean, to wave Hitler's signature about, shouting that everything was all right now. Joyous, don't you think?) Such ghastly weather can never have been known since the Flood. There's been no light at all, so I haven't painted a thing. All June and July I sat cowering over a raging fire with Jaundice. (That's a dog—not the disease.) One day, at the end of July, hope revived because I saw a man sitting out in a garden. But I discovered, later, that he was doing it for a bet.

Simply frightful! Day after day after day—each like a snapshot of a different part of hell. Rattling windows, groaning doors, icy rain, maniac winds! Cloudbursts; end-of-the-world thunderstorms;

earthquakes in divers places! At last I got so tired of Jaundice's howling that I went down on all fours and howled with him. I rather enjoyed it. One gets dreadfully tired of this lord of creation business, nowadays, don't you think? Besides, it's perfectly clear that Nature loathes man—and I certainly do not blame her.

Well, at last this nightmare summer came to an end, and then a miracle happened. Autumn arrived overnight. Autumn, in all her first shy loveliness! Autumn, in a halo of mist, like a young very loving angel—shedding pity and peace. I drew the curtain one morning and—there she was! And now, every day, opalescent dawns—and afternoon skies like shot-silk. And lovely languorous slow-moving cloud-shadows; and mellow sunshine caressing the beauty of the disrobing trees.

Perhaps only lonely people love autumn. I don't know. But I love her. And I love her best in England. All the other seasons shout at you: autumn steals to your side and takes your arm. She persuades you to forgive every one and everything. She makes hatred seem as stupid as the tantrums of an angry child. But, above all, she reconciles you to yourself.

Yes, she reconciles you to yourself. You cease to rebel against the fact that you are what you are. She makes your vices seem like idle dreams. She is an alchemist, who turns everything into gold, only to scatter largesse.

So I suddenly became radiantly happy. And then, of course, I made a frightful mistake.

I hadn't seen any one for weeks, so I suggested myself for a short stay at the Wittenshaws'. (He's a kind of cousin of mine, who lives in regal splendour at Cranby Hall.)

Well, in due course, I arrived at the Elizabethan mansion. Peasants bowed low as my battered car approached the great gates of the famous drive. I stayed for exactly one week. And I spent the whole of the time in the dirty-linen basket.

It's perfectly true. The creature who valeted me took it for granted that I should wear a clean dress shirt every night—so he flung each away in turn as if it were plague-ridden. Well, nowadays, a dress shirt has to serve me for *two* nights. So I spent my time on my head in the dirty-linen basket, recovering close friends of many years' standing.

The whole visit was a ghastly failure, and I returned to Jaundice feeling utterly miserable and with record blood pressure.

The simple fact is that I don't belong anywhere. I never have. I made what I regarded as perfectly normal remarks at the Wittenshaws—with bomb-like results. So I really must do one of two things:

either accept solitude, once and finally; or go to a psycho-analyst and be made normal.

Now, do tell me this—because I simply long to know. Suppose I go to a psycho-analyst, or something, and he turns me into a Buck Mannering. I suppose that would really be a terrific triumph for science, wouldn't it? I mean, Buck is so normal that, if they made me just like him, it would be a stupendous achievement. Or wouldn't it? What do you think? I can't make up my mind. But wouldn't it be extraordinary to burst out of a consulting-room one day—having been turned into another Buck Mannering—and then start leaping at women!

Every one at the Wittenshaws was talking about war, of course—talking about it, not as a stupendous national calamity, but as if it were something which would be decided by their set when the time for decision came. The whole place was like a super-barracks. Frightful women—with nothing projecting except their teeth—turned up to lunch one day in the most terrible uniforms. "I don't know whether they'll frighten the enemy, but, by God, they frighten me!" What a fearsome failure modern women are! All this pathetic aping of men! Sheer suicide, from their point of view! Their only chance was to remain mysterious and—to remain mysterious—they should have stayed in the background. I don't know which was their greater error: to reveal themselves mentally; or to reveal themselves physically. I can't help disliking them. They have such frightful voices. One of the Wittenshaw women had a voice with a warbling note, just like an air-raid warning.

So you've had the courage to meet Iris and Douglas. I dare not meet them because I am quite certain he'll murder her, and I do not want to be there.

Also, I hear you've met Ernest, but not Ethel. It's a tragedy that Ernest married. He was a bachelor when he was sucking his toes in the cradle. Actually, he was in love with the ancient spinster aunt who brought him up and who left him her money. When I say "in love," you know what I mean. All Ernest wants is a "mother" in the background. But when the aunt died, the blonde Ethel swooped down on him. Buck says she made him seduce her by sheer force, then dragged him to the altar. A case of rape, if ever there were one.

You know, of course, that you are a huge success with Sir Michael. Such a satisfactory old man! You are the only person who will drink rum-and-milk with him. He's one of the three people I should really miss if I never saw him again. Everything he says is quite absurd, but, somehow, he isn't. Women adore him—that's why he is

romantic about them—but he has the sense to ignore nine-tenths of what they do, and ten-tenths of what they say. The old man is the only really positive person I know. We are all ghosts compared with him.

What's happened to Rupert? He was always revolting, but he used to be intelligent. He wrote, asking me to lend him some money. His letter arrived with three others, every one of which began : " Unless by the 20th of this month . . ." So I simply sent the three of them to Rupert. It saved writing.

I would love to know what you think of these queer cases of loss of memory one keeps reading about in the papers. There were two reported yesterday—two cases in Yorkshire. One was quite a young girl, and the other was a shepherd. They are sane enough, but they simply cannot remember anything that happened before last Saturday. As a result of suffering from this " affliction," as the newspapers call it, they have met—and it is rumoured they are going to marry. But why is it an " affliction " to lose one's memory? Why be handcuffed to the past? Thank heaven, my memory isn't what it was! The other night I tried to recall my most debauched moments, but, somehow, my memories of them had become misty and vague. I should like to lose my memory altogether. It would be like being born again.

I hear Christopher has left Beulah Island, but that no one knows where he is. They were all talking about him at the Wittenshaws. Can you *imagine* possessing his enormous wealth in a bankrupt world? For it is bankrupt, of course. That is why I am certain there will be war. It's war or revolution. So the Wittenshaws in every country will choose war. And then the nations will march—with the single exception of Mr. Bristowe.

And now I may as well tell you that, in a few months, I am going to be certified and go to Beulah Island. I wrote to Dr. Fordyce and asked if this could be arranged. His reply came yesterday. It said they had had me " under observation " for some time and that he did not think there would be any difficulty. So that is what Mr. Bristowe is going to do. He has had quite enough of the world of the sane. Quite enough of this " armament factory " existence. I'd rather be certified and have done with it, once for all. But I do hope they'll let me take Jaundice to Beulah Island.

Oh, I must tell you this! I had a simply charming letter from Belinda. What can have happened to her? She used to write the dreariest notes imaginable, but this last letter is so witty and wise. If you see her, do tell her I am writing soon.

One thing more, then I must stop. It's time to draw curtains and have tea. But I must tell you this.

You know those sudden fits of devastating depression that descend on you for no imaginable reason and hurl you into the bottomless pit? One descended on me yesterday.

I was perfectly all right, walking along a lane with Jaundice. It had been raining, but now everything was sparkling in the sunshine. And then—*it* descended. All the horrors that are going on all over the world suddenly seemed to surround me like hosts of spectres. Everything one had ever hoped, believed, or loved—just dwindled and died. It was annihilating. I slunk along, feeling that I was the only mourner at the funeral of the universe.

When I got home, I found a post card from Rosa. It said she thought it was too bad that, when I was at Beulah Island, I did not have a roll in the cowslips with her.

Well—can you believe it?—I instantly became perfectly joyous. I rushed out into the glittering garden, and ran races with Jaundice—every one of which the brute won.

Yours,

GODFREY.

CHAPTER XIII

Ernest and Ethel

I

SOMETIMES—when you have heard a man's opinions on a number of subjects—you learn something about him which gives those opinions an entirely new background. You suddenly realize that his judgments on men and affairs have a purely personal significance, because they are rooted in a deep emotional disturbance.

This happened to me with Ernest Mannering.

Knowing what I know now, it seems extraordinary that my first glimpse of Ernest, at the family council, did not tell me everything about him. Not only had he remained silent during the whole of the discussion, but his attitude had indicated a fastidious dislike of every one present. Sitting at that table in Harold Teasdale's office, with his scholarly features distorted as if he had been aware of a bad smell, he had looked like a marooned intellectual—which is precisely what he is.

A week or two after the family council, he telephoned to ask if I would care to dine with him, and, directly I accepted, he explained that it might be necessary to put me off. I told him that did not matter in the least, but, whenever he asked me to dinner, each invitation was qualified by a reference to the possibility of postponement.

He had a small Queen Anne house at the end of a cul-de-sac near Westminster—a house which was part of his very being. So much so that he never referred to it and, if you praised it, he became slightly embarrassed—rather like a lover forced to listen to an inventory of his lady's beauty. It was too intimately a part of him for casual discussion. You were expected to accept the house—to accept it with its pictures, its rare editions, its glass, china, silver—in the same way as you accepted him. That is to say, without comment, and at face value. There must be no probing of any kind—and praise is a form of probing. The house existed to create an atmosphere. Ernest Mannering existed to create an atmosphere. You should collaborate with that atmosphere by an appropriate reaction. You should become slightly exotic—like a plant promoted to a hothouse.

There was a hint of the foppish in his clothes and his movements, and he had many mental mannerisms, the chief being that he expected you to understand what he had not said. Ernest Mannering loved the

oblique. Any direct statement—any reference to naked facts—offended him. One should accept people at their surface value. One should discuss them in the abstract. And one should be courteous to every one—especially to those one loathed.

Sometimes, when I was talking to him in the rather precious dining-room or drinking coffee in the dimly-lit study, with its ascending rows of rare editions, I would suddenly remember that this man was married and that his wife lived in the house. And I did not believe it. I could not believe it, because Ernest Mannering seemed so remote from women that it was difficult to believe he had been born of one.

At this time, however, I knew little about him. He seldom referred to himself, and his brother, Douglas, had only abused him during our conversation in The Rat-Hole. Also, Buck, for once, had left me to make my own discoveries about Ernest. It is true Buck had said: "Ernest is a mental pansy. So are his friends. Only mental ones, because they haven't the vitality to be anything else." Which told me something, though not much.

But Godfrey Bristowe's letter gave facts, and facts of a very revealing nature.

It was necessary only to know that Ernest had been brought up by an elderly spinster aunt in order to realize how remote he had always been from the actualities of the everyday world, especially as this aunt had left her money to him and none to Douglas. Ernest had been educated by a tutor and, eventually, had gone up to Cambridge; whereas Douglas had been sent to a public school and, on leaving, had had to fend for himself.

But it was Bristowe's account of Ernest's marriage which chiefly interested me, for it provided an explanation of that most mysterious event.

There is only one way, of course, to understand another person—and that is to identify oneself imaginatively with that person. And, having met Ernest frequently, it was not difficult to reconstruct the kind of life he had lived with his aunt in the little Queen Anne house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

It was easy to visualize her, in the background, discreetly arranging every domestic detail so as to ensure the maximum comfort for the fastidious Ernest. Her devotion would have delighted in fulfilling the many demands of his feminine nature. It was easy to guess that she had associated herself wholly with his interests. Everything in her which had withered, because no one had wanted it, would have blossomed to serve him. His books, his pictures—all his treasures—had been tended with loving solicitude. A strange, deep, tacit understanding must have existed between them—a subconscious recogni-

tion of inner kinship. She had given everything and, probably, had gone to her grave convinced of the magnitude of her debt to him. And she may have been right. The relations between human beings are far too complex to be represented by a profit-and-loss account.

But it is quite certain that when his aunt was alive everything had functioned perfectly in the little Queen Anne house. The banalities of existence had been banished: difficulties had been ironed out behind the scenes. It had all been extremely pleasant. Ernest had spent part of each day at his chambers—he was a barrister though, naturally, he had never had a brief—and returned home in time for tea. He had many bachelor friends; several dilettante interests; and no actual vices. His had been an elegant, frictionless, lady-like existence.

And then—his aunt died.

She not only died, but she died very suddenly.

It is questionable whether Ernest ever forgave this extremely rapid exit. A long lingering illness would have suited him much better, for it would have enabled him to make plans. She had shown a total lack of consideration, and Ernest felt justifiably aggrieved.

Everything she had ever done for him was forgotten in his exasperation at her sudden departure. For once, she had acted without consulting him. He had not forgiven her, although she had been dead for over a year when I met him.

Actually, however, for a man of his temperament, his predicament had been a serious one. It was comparable with that of a man who had gone to sleep in a punt in a backwater—and had wakened to find himself surrounded by a raging sea. One shock followed another—like the successive onset of foam-crested breakers. First, Death entered the little Queen Anne house. It just strode in and assumed command. For three days It ordered everything. And then It departed—leaving a new silence.

While he was still stunned by the crudity of this onslaught, another breaker reared menacingly—then hurled its volumed might at the defenceless Ernest.

One morning, a week after his aunt's death, he took a sip of his early-morning tea and knew—instantly—that the teapot had not been warmed and that the water had not boiled. Ernest waited for the world to end, but, as nothing happened, he went downstairs in due course—only to find that normality had vanished. Breakfast was late.

When he remonstrated with the parlour-maid, she gave notice. Then the cook gave notice. Then the housemaid gave notice. They all made the same remarks, which were to the effect that they were

used to his aunt and understood her ways, and had always done their best to give satisfaction, and believed that they *had* given satisfaction, but—now she was gone—they had decided to make a change, particularly as everything reminded them of her, who had always been very good to them all these years, and that the house seemed " eerie-like " without her.

So the staff departed—and a succession of extraordinary women appeared who smoked cigarettes, broke precious glass, and demanded a radio which emitted remarkable noises at all hours of the day and night.

In two months, Ernest was practically demented. He was alone in a topsy-turvy house. He went out to breakfast—lunched and dined at his club—and was as wretched as a comfort-loving cat abandoned by heartless owners.

Finally, when he was literally on the edge of nervous collapse—Ethel appeared.

According to Bristowe, Buck had said that the blonde Ethel made Ernest seduce her by sheer force, then dragged him to the altar. But I doubt it. I believe the seduction of Ernest was psychic rather than physical.

Practically the only information I had about Ethel, at this time, can be summed up in three sentences. She was some years younger than Ernest. She had been married and divorced. And, when she met Ernest, she was engaged to an elderly widower.

It has been said that some women, and many animals, recognize the essential weakness of their victims on sight. And I have little doubt that it was necessary for Ethel only to see Ernest in order to know which weapon to use. Anyway, she must have been very confident, because she instantly dismissed the elderly widower.

At the time of their meeting, Ernest was at the mercy of any one who could restore tranquillity to the little Queen Anne house. Ethel realized this at a glance. She offered her help. Within a few weeks she had obtained an efficient staff, and had trained each member of it in the ways of the old régime. Miraculously, Ernest's frictionless existence returned. Ethel effected a transformation scene. The little bachelor dinner-parties were as delightful as ever.

This went on for a few weeks, then Ethel announced that she was going away for some time. Two days after her departure, the cook gave notice—which may or may not have been a coincidence.

Ernest wired Ethel asking her to return.

A month later they were married.

II

I had dined with Ernest several times since our meeting at the family council, but, as I had never encountered Ethel, and as he never referred to her, it was clear that he did not want me to meet her. I imagined that the reason why he always referred to the possibility of postponement, when inviting me to dinner, was that he wished to be able to put me off if Ethel suddenly announced a last-minute change in her plans.

One afternoon, in the early part of November, he telephoned and asked me to dine with him that night. He apologized for giving such short notice, then pressed me to come if at all possible.

I arrived at about seven-thirty and was shown into the dimly-lit study, where we usually drank a glass of sherry wine before dinner.

I had not seen him for several weeks, and, while we talked generalities, I again noted the foppishness of his clothes and the fastidious air which characterized his least movement. The narrow head with its mouse-coloured hair was always a little to one side, and the nervous, faded eyes looked apprehensively at the world. The way in which he touched things implied resentment at the necessity for doing so. The almost feminine figure and the scholarly features suggested a delicacy which shrank from contact with actualities.

An incident occurred, just before we went in to dinner, which interested me.

He was adjusting the position of a cushion on the sofa when a woman's unfolded handkerchief came into view. He gazed at it for a moment, picked it up—then threw it into the fire.

A few minutes later we went to the dining-room and, once we were seated, I told him I had had a long letter from Godfrey Bristowe.

"I like Godfrey," he said, in his usual rather plaintive tone, as he glanced critically round the table. "He is one of the very few people I do like. But I do wish he were not so indiscreet."

"You think he is very indiscreet?"

"Absurdly! He reveals himself to every one. It is a mistake to be—indiscriminate."

"Perhaps you are right. But the most indiscreet person I have ever met is Buck, and it does not seem to get him into trouble."

"Why should it—in his case? Most men—and all women—secretly admire Buck. It's odd you mentioned that animal. I'm rather indebted to it at the moment."

After a pause, he went on:

"You know, of course, that I dislike my brother Douglas. I find

it quite incredible that he can be jealous of that vulgar wife of his—Iris. If she has affairs with other men, he ought to be grateful for being relieved of that revolting relationship. I dislike him—and he dislikes me. That is the position and it will remain the position—because we are men and are therefore capable of consistent action."

Almost immediately he added:

"Till recently, our respective wives also disliked each other. Merely a reflection, of course, of *our* dislike. Well, all that is over. They are now as thick as—thieves."

He uttered the last word in a tone which implied that it was not the most appropriate one.

"I'm surprised to hear that," I said, "as I understood that your wife had no use for Iris—and vice versa."

"Buck effected a reconciliation."

"Buck!" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Certainly. They met—by chance—at his place, and now they are friends. Evidently they have something in common. At the moment that animal, Buck, is in Paris. A girl called Helen is also there. She was determined to go, and her parents thought it would be an admirable idea for Buck to keep an eye on her. Which I have no doubt he will do."

This news interested me for many reasons. So much so that it was some moments before I realized his total indifference to everything relating to his wife. Apparently, provided he was spared her presence, he did not care what she did or whom she met.

Nevertheless, despite this detachment, I felt he was disturbed about something. The fact that he was discussing others in this intimate way showed a determination to distract his thoughts, for, normally, he avoided personal references to others. Recently, however, I had heard rumours about his wife's extravagance, and I assumed this had disturbed him.

For the sake of saying something, I asked if he had seen Rupert lately.

He did not give a direct answer, because he rarely gave a direct answer.

"Rupert is not a fool. His dealings with Belinda prove that. He is an up-to-date swindler. Everything nowadays is bogus—and there is a lot of pseudo-spirituality about. That gives Rupert his chance. He swindles silly hysterical women, who confuse sexuality with religion. And I hope he goes on swindling them. Psychic prostitutes are even more repellent than physical ones."

After a long silence, I asked about Sir Michael, but Ernest refused to say much about any one who drank rum. He merely asserted that

Sir Michael had the Mannering weakness for young girls, and that he would cheat the family by marrying one and producing a herd of children.

Again there was a long silence.

I glanced at him. There he sat at the other end of the refectory table, continually looking round the rather precious room, which was one of the major joys of his life, but which evidently provided scant satisfaction to-night.

At last he said:

"Some barbarian at the club to-day had the originality to ask whether I thought there would be war. I do wonder why no one seems to realize that modern life has become entirely meaningless. If they did realize that, they would not try to discuss events in rational terms."

"You think, then, that it is entirely meaningless?"

"Entirely. Actually, of course, events are no longer under the control of men. We have called spirits from the vasty deep—with the result that we are now the slaves of those spirits. You might as well try to explain an earthquake in logical terms as attempt to discuss current events rationally. Consider, for instance, all this absurd talk about dictators. There is only one dictator in Europe to-day—Frankenstein. The other dictators are merely his office boys."

"Then I suppose you think that, if war comes, it will be as meaningless as everything else?"

"Obviously. There will be a lot of fine words, of course, but the cause of the war will be lack of Jobs. Nothing else. Everything to-day is a matter of Jobs. Only war can create Jobs, so war is inevitable."

Then he added:

"The position is that one first-class nation will have to be destroyed industrially—in order to provide economic elbow-room for its rivals."

He developed this theme at length but I listened to little of it, chiefly because I was contrasting his criticisms of the modern world with those of Rupert. Rupert's criticism had one end and only one—to enhance his own spiritual stature. But Ernest's criticism did not proceed from egotism. He discussed the actual world only because circumstances no longer permitted him to ignore it. All he asked was to be left alone, and he wasn't being left alone. He was a sensitive plant whose hothouse had been destroyed.

He discussed current affairs in precisely the same way in which he touched things—as if he deeply resented the necessity for doing so.

Towards the end of dinner, he asked my opinion of Harold

Teasdale, and something in his tone made me think that he attached considerable importance to my reply.

I said that Teasdale struck me as being an extremely able man, and that I should be very sorry to have him for an enemy on his own ground.

"I entirely agree. The ablest man I have ever met. I have complete faith in him. Financially, he is a wizard. He will outwit the most unfavourable circumstances."

"And, apart from his ability, what do you think of him?" I asked.

"He is the only person I really admire. Nothing penetrates his defences. He imposes his own values on every one. He creates his own atmosphere everywhere. His contempt for people is so profound that he is courteous to the most arrant fools. He would never pay even the stupidest woman the compliment of being exasperated by her. Harold Teasdale is not a man—he is a work of art."

He rose as he said:

"Let us have coffee in the other room."

Now, directly we entered the study, we heard a minor commotion in the hall. Then a door banged, and a woman began talking at the top of her voice.

A moment later the study door opened—and Ethel Mannering flounced into the room.

III

Ethel was about thirty—a genuine blonde with an extremely plain face and a remarkably good figure. She tried to make you forget the former by being immensely vital; and she exhibited the latter to the best possible advantage. Snowy shoulders emerged from a jade-green dress, which defined full round breasts and shapely hips. An aura of perfume surrounded her. She did not enter the room—she took possession of it.

"Hal-*lo*!" she said to me. "So we meet at last. My dinner date died early, so I thought I'd come and have coffee with you before I go on to the Drewsons'."

"We are delighted—naturally," Ernest said with elaborate courtesy. "We are not having coffee, but, of course, I will order some for you."

"It doesn't matter."

She flung herself on to a sofa, crossed her legs—revealing a generous instalment of jade-green stockings—then began to talk as if we were alone.

"Iris had to rush off somewhere unexpectedly. She had another frightful row with Douglas this morning. Impossible person! But he likes you. You had a hectic evening with him at The Rat-Hole, didn't you? Iris likes you too. She's rather peeved you haven't been to see her since that evening at The Tabarin."

The emphatic, confident voice went on and on, but I did not give much attention, because Ernest's reaction to her sudden appearance interested me more than her non-stop remarks.

He remained standing, and although on the rare occasions when she addressed him he always replied with studied courtesy, his whole attitude suggested that of a keeper in a cage with a dangerous animal.

"It's really thrilling to meet you. You're a smash-hit with Sir Michael. He says Christopher must be sane as he chose you for his companion. That's nonsense, of course. Aren't you terrified at the thought of living with a lunatic?"

I said I was not terrified—and Ernest remarked that such a predicament was more common than is generally recognized.

Soon, Ethel realized she was not making progress. She uncrossed her legs, smoothed her very attractive hair, then said in a more intellectual tone:

"Pity my dinner date died so early. Poynter Primrose was there. He had to fly back to the F.O., but he was thrilling about Jugo-Slavia. Told us all about the internal affairs of the Serbs and the Croats and the Slovaks——"

"Possibly the Slovenes," Ernest interjected.

"And then he asked *me* whether I thought there would be war. He said *he* was so immersed in detail that he could not see the water for the duck-weed. I told him one couldn't have an opinion on the isolated issue of war. One had to relate that opinion to one's social and economic beliefs. He quite saw what I meant."

"Naturally," Ernest interposed respectfully.

"And then we discussed the psychic aspect of the whole situation. He's tremendously keen on the Pyramid Prophecies and he's made a real study of Hitler's horoscope. Then he told us about a new book, just out, which gives an entirely new interpretation of Revelations. He says it proves—absolutely—that the Rider on the White Horse, who went forth conquering and to conquer, is Chamberlain."

"Really!" Ernest exclaimed. "I presume the White Horse shied at Munich."

"Angus Major was there," Ethel went on, still addressing me. "He's a don at Cambridge. An historian. Absurdly young, but a first-rate mind. Iris is thrilled by him. Says he's made her see affairs in historical perspective."

" Let us hope he does the same for Douglas."

Then Ernest added :

" What a pity Buck was not there. When Buck is present, at a mixed intellectual party, he gives a certain reality to the proceedings. Don't you think so, Drake?"

" I can't say," I replied. " I've been to several mixed parties with Buck, but they weren't exactly intellectual ones."

" Buck is what he is," Ethel announced in a sharpened tone. " And most modern men are either like him, or they are—impotent."

Having shot this arrow into the air, she paused before saying to me:

" I hadn't met Angus Major before. He's charming. He says he is making a study of Iris's intuitions."

" A fertile field for historical research," Ernest announced impartially. " And you had to rush away from this fascinating party?"

" Yes, too bad, wasn't it?" Ethel said to me, as if I had asked the question. " Someone telephoned Iris and she had to go. She and Douglas are in a frightful state financially. She said Teasdale will simply *have* to realize capital for them."

Then she raced on :

" But you're telling me nothing about yourself. I called once at Meridian Square, but you were out. Who is the queer maid who opened the door?"

" Rosa."

" Where did you get her?"

" I didn't get her. She was there when I arrived."

" Very strange person! I'm interested in domestics because it's so difficult to get good ones. Still, I've managed up to now. I do hope they gave you a good dinner?"

She asked the question with genuine interest. I could see that she still recognized the necessity for making Ernest comfortable at home.

I told her that the dinner had been excellent—then she leaned back and crossed her legs again.

" Iris says you're a dark horse, and, now I've met you, I think she's right. Anyway, I'm sure to run into you again somewhere."

She rose, studied her reflection in a mirror for some moments, then stretched slowly and languorously.

" Oh dear! I suppose I'll have to go to the Drewsons'. Their parties are quite fun, but they go on so late. If I don't get away by four, they will have to give me a bed."

She drew herself to her full height, then turned and faced me.

" Well, I must go. No, no! I simply *must*!" she exclaimed, as if I had protested. " But you are not to move."

Then, without a word to Ernest, or a glance in his direction, she

bounced out of the room and, a moment later, we heard her shouting instructions to the maids.

At last the front door banged.

Ernest's attitude did not alter, however. He remained standing, his head to one side, listening intently.

And, sure enough, before long, the front door was flung open—more instructions were shouted to the maids—then the door banged again. And outraged Silence returned.

There was no doubt that, this time, Ethel had finally departed. Only the disarranged cushions on the sofa—and a strong scent of perfume—bore witness to her visit.

Ernest parted the curtains—pushed the window up as far as it would go—then opened the door to its widest extent.

After which, he replaced the cushions in their original positions, then lit a cigar.

At last he said:

"And now, I think, I can ring for coffee."

IV

In due course the coffee appeared and there now seemed no reason why the remainder of the evening should not conform with the pattern established by our former meetings. But I soon saw that Ernest could not recover his customary manner. His dilemma was similar to that of a man accustomed to delivering well-rehearsed speeches, who suddenly had to make an extempore one.

Eventually, I found the situation so embarrassing that I said:

"Perhaps I'd better go."

"Don't *go*!" he exclaimed irritably. Then he added somewhat enigmatically: "The longer you stay, the better."

It is a peculiar experience to watch a man become a different person under one's eyes, but that is exactly what was happening now. The foppish, fastidious, cultured Ernest Mannering was turning into a being possessed by impotent hatred. As I watched him, I understood why he had always taken such elaborate precautions to ensure that Ethel should be out when I dined with him.

At last he crossed to the armchair opposite me and sat down.

"If you care for farce, Drake, there is a book I can recommend. It is a history of the Suffragette Movement. Read it. Read the speeches of the leaders in their fight for the freedom of women. All that hysterical rubbish was regarded as a real issue only twenty-five years

ago. Well, look at modern women and see what they have made of their precious freedom."

"You evidently don't think they've made much of it."

"Made much of Freedom! Women! No woman has ever had an original idea, and not a single woman knows what an idea is. They are so false that they do not know what falsity is. They are wholly negative, wholly passive, and—outside the kitchen and the nursery—wholly ridiculous."

The contempt and hatred in his tone so surprised me that some moments passed before I said:

"If you are right, most men have been deceived all down the ages."

"They wanted to be deceived. And are you surprised—when you consider what women actually are? Men have exhausted their imaginations creating myths about women. The Madonna myth is the greatest, of course. And, incidentally, the Madonna myth dominates official Christianity far more than the figure of Christ. But all men have created myths about women—heroes, and men of action, just as much as drivelling, sentimental male novelists. No one seems to realize the significance of the fact that men *had* to idealize women."

Before I could say anything, he went on:

"If you want facts about women, get a woman's opinion of them. Women have no illusions about their own sex."

"That's all very well, but you ignore that there have been plenty of exceptional women."

"And every one of them was half a man—and would have given anything to be wholly one. The simple truth is that men have invented every quality which women are supposed to possess: tenderness, loyalty, modesty. The invention of modesty was an imaginative triumph."

He rose and began to pace the room while he delivered an endless diatribe against women.

It began with the statement that what threatened civilization was not war, but the ever-increasing dominion of women. That dominion involved a world of "movie-values"—with hysteria dictating public opinion—and Comfort, "cultureless Comfort," the only creed. That was the feminine ideal, and it was rotting civilization like subtly-spreading syphilis.

He then asserted that, whatever the political origins of Nazi-ism might be, its psychological origin was a determination to put women where they belonged—in the kitchen and the nursery. And that the persecution of the Jews belonged, psychologically, to this programme because the Jews were a feminine race. That was why they were

ostentatious, oozed self-satisfaction and were devoid of the faculty of self-criticism. Jews, like women, could become anything—because they were nothing.

"If you want an example, Drake, of complete fatuity in dealing with a woman, you'd better study my brother Douglas. Women are either the mother type or the prostitute type. The difference is not very wide, but Iris, of course, is just a prostitute. The fact that she has two children means precisely nothing to her. And Douglas is jealous of that creature! And half-believes in her fidelity! If he weren't a sexual maniac, he'd divorce her. He's very fortunate to possess such abundant evidence against her."

"You are certain he does possess it?" I asked. Then, before he could reply, I added: "But what really interests me is that, presumably, you think Buck's attitude to women is the only realistic one."

"It is remarkably successful. And I am sure you appreciate the implications of that fact."

After a silence, he said suddenly:

"Another world war, with huge casualties, will make women supreme. A striking example of the survival of the fittest! But before long, of course, women will insist on being soldiers. Their envy of men will compel them to invade every male activity. They try already to ape his creative power, although they never have, and never will, create anything."

At this point, chiefly in the hope of switching him to another subject, I asked whether he thought war was inevitable.

"I've told you I think it is. And most Englishmen will welcome it."

That was a new idea to me, and I told him so.

"It's a very obvious one. Most Englishmen are schoolboys—and schoolboys are happy only when they are together, and away from women. I admit that Englishmen loathe killing, but, that apart, they will welcome war because it sends them back to school and gets them away from women."

"And the exceptional Englishman?"

"Lives in solitude," he replied. "Which is something that no woman understands—and of which she is entirely incapable. A woman exists only through her relations with others, so she is never alone—in the real meaning of the word."

He amplified this theory, but I only half-listened. What chiefly interested me was the discovery that his opinions, on every subject, were derived from this monomaniac hatred of women.

At last he stopped talking and I rose to go.

"Even if all you say is true, Mannering, doesn't it all add up to

this? Nine-tenths of life is simply a struggle for power. Well, women fight with the only weapon they possess—the power of attraction. That they should be attractive physically, is all that most men demand of women. So, inevitably, to be attractive physically is all that most women care about."

"Exactly! So Buck's philosophy is the only realistic one."

I noticed that, when we went into the hall, he glanced apprehensively at a pile of letters on a salver. I imagined they were bills—and that he knew it.

"Teasdale tells me," he said suddenly, "that you still do not know when Christopher will arrive."

"I've no idea."

"Well, remember, I'm counting on him—and you."

I was too surprised to make any comment, so I simply said good-night and left him.

As I walked home, I realized that although the relations between Douglas and Iris were more melodramatic than those between Ernest and Ethel, the latter possessed equally grim possibilities.

CHAPTER XIV

A Man at a Window

A CRISP sunny morning in early December. . . .

As I walked slowly down Piccadilly, it suddenly occurred to me that I was going to have a whole day to myself. I could scarcely believe it. For months I had lived in a whirl of engagements which had succeeded one another with such bewildering rapidity that each had emerged and vanished like a scene glimpsed from a speeding car.

And now, by a miracle, I had a day to myself. Temporarily, I was outside the chaotic world into which I had plunged the day after my meeting with Arthur Mannering in the Place du Tertre. And, being outside it, I realized more deeply the complexity of the situation in which I had become so intimately involved.

In one way, the most extraordinary aspect of this situation was the fact that during the last few months I had entered into remarkable relations with Viola Teasdale's children. In retrospect, it seemed miraculous that this woman—whose loveliness had haunted my childhood—had been the means of totally transforming my life. Whenever her name was mentioned, I saw the squalid room in which I had found the newspaper containing her photograph, and I experienced again the emotional storm which had swept me at the sudden discovery that such beauty walked the world.

Remembering that beauty, it did not seem strange to me that her conduct had outraged convention and thrown the whole Mannering family "out-of-gear." It did not seem strange because I have always believed that Beauty has a destiny of its own, and fulfils that destiny without regard to rules and traditions. It would have been sheer impossibility for Viola Teasdale to have had a commonplace career, and to have gone to a commonplace grave. Beauty is power. It is physical genius. And genius does not walk down well-worn roads.

The main facts of her life came back to me now, as I sauntered along a sunlit Piccadilly.

She had married John Mannering in 1901, when she was eighteen. Arthur, Douglas, Ernest, Maud, and Rupert had been born in quick succession, then—when she was twenty-four—John Mannering died. Three *months* later she married the explorer—Alastair Bell. A year later Christopher was born. Then—in 1921—Alastair and Viola died in a flying accident.

It was interesting how much, and how little, this crude summary revealed. It told you all the facts, with the exception of the one you wanted most to know—which was, the quality of their lives after their marriage in 1907. They had gone abroad, and they had stayed abroad. A mist enveloped them, but one fact emerged from this mist like a mountain: Life, for Viola, had been Alastair Bell.

"He was sun, moon, and stars to her. Everything she had known before marrying him was just obliterated. Literally, *everything*. To be fair to her, you must remember that she married my father when she was eighteen. And she certainly was never in the least in love with him. Anyway, Alastair swept her away like a tidal wave."

That is what Arthur Mannering had said in the Place du Tertre. And he had added: "You can imagine what happened to the children. I was the oldest—and I was five. We were all brought up by various uncles and aunts. . . . From very early days we were schemers and intriguers. Remember that. It's important."

But at this point I had to stop thinking about Viola Teasdale. I had reached Hyde Park Corner. As I wanted to cross to the park, it was necessary to concentrate all my mental activities on this perilous feat.

Any one who asserts that adventure is lacking in modern life has not attempted to cross at Hyde Park Corner. Frequently, the first stage of this gamble with death seems propitious. The traffic, apparently, is held up. One crosses to an island—sets confidently forth on the second stage—only to find that an avalanche of frenzied monsters, full of sound and fury, signifying murder, is hurtling towards one from a totally unexpected direction.

However, after a series of sorties—and a series of hair-raising retreats—I eventually reached the pavement near the entrance to the park.

I stood for some moments, looking round.

A December sun shone in a cold blue sky: an impish wind frisked round corners: a plane droned overhead. Harassed-looking pedestrians made their way along thronged pavements, glancing at the news posters, most of which referred to some aspect of the catastrophic situation which had developed after the Munich settlement.

I went into the park, then strolled towards the Serpentine.

It was now possible to forget one's surroundings, so I continued to review the situation in which I found myself, and eventually decided that nothing could be more indicative of the life I had lived since my arrival in England than the fact that I literally had not had time to think about Christopher. I had been swept away like a leaf in a maelstrom, with the result that weeks and months had passed

without my fully realizing the extraordinary fact that Christopher had not appeared and I had heard nothing from him.

I had recognized, of course, that this was remarkable, but I had been too deeply concerned with Buck, Harold Teasdale, Rupert, Douglas, Ernest—and a host of others; above all, Rosa—to be able to probe the mystery of Christopher. And yet I owed everything to this unknown man.

As I walked round the Serpentine, I recalled not only the facts about Christopher, but everything I had heard about him. Arthur Mannering had supplied most of the facts—and I half-felt I was again in the Place du Tertre, hearing him say:

"Christopher was thirteen when Alastair and Viola died. None of us had seen him as he had always lived abroad. And we scarcely saw him after his parents died—because Alastair's will had some odd instructions about Christopher's education. He was educated by a succession of tutors and, quite often, we did not know where he was. . . . When Christopher turned up—when he was about nineteen—he was much too much for the Mannerings. . . . He looked like a god on holiday—he had plenty of money—and a first-rate intellect. All sorts of glittering prizes were within reach of his hand. Well, he just did not bother about any of all that. He seemed possessed by a passion for experience. He had the gift of packing a lifetime into six months. He had lived a dozen lives before he was twenty. I've never met any one in the least like him—and I hope to God I never do again. He might have been someone from a different race. . . .

"Just before he was twenty-eight Christopher became queer. He lost his memory. He did not know any of us—and he did not remember a thing about the past. He became very eccentric. He didn't seem to know what to do next. It's not easy to explain. He went on as if this world had ceased to exist for him—as if he were aware of another world quite different from this one."

That was what Arthur Mannering had told me in the Place du Tertre, and he had gone on to explain that, eventually, Christopher had been certified at his own request—and had gone to Beulah Island, the mental colony run by Dr. Fordyce.

"Get *this* into your head, Drake, whatever you do. Directly Christopher was certified, his money affairs were put into the hands of the Master in Lunacy—or whoever it is. It was then the family discovered the extent of Christopher's wealth."

Then, having related the effect of this discovery on the family, Arthur had gone on to explain that Christopher had just been certified sane.

"And the family is in a ferment. He's master of his money again.

As the Mannerings are quite certain he is still mad, they are terrified that he'll give the money away, or go in for good works."

Those were the facts I had learned in the Place du Tertre—and everything I had heard from others since coming to England had only amplified them.

But what had amazed me was the number of people who had had some contact with Christopher, however slight. Often, when talking to some man in the street or the park, I had mentioned Christopher's name—and had discovered that my companion had met him once, either in some out-of-the-way part of the world, or in unusual circumstances. But, to the great majority, Christopher meant Money and nothing else. They were hypnotized by his vast fortune. And I am not surprised.

I am not surprised because, in a bankrupt world, here was a man whose wealth had grown with the years till it had become fabulous. Here was wealth—real Wealth—in a world so bankrupt that it could continue to exist only by frenzied preparation for war.

It was not very extraordinary, therefore, that the Mannerings and Teasdales—and a host of others—impatiently awaited the return of Christopher. To most of them, he was a madman with money. To a few, he was a man who had gone to the end of the roads half-travelled by them.

I had been so intent on these thoughts that I had forgotten my surroundings, but I now came to a standstill—and gazed across the Serpentine.

Who was this man? This Christopher Bell, who had chosen me to be his companion? For he *had* chosen me. Of that I was certain. Arthur Mannering had been only the instrument of that choice. What could Christopher possibly want with me—an outcast and a failure—who, a few months ago, had been on the brink of suicide?

There was no answer to these questions, but, as I continued to think about them, a new idea occurred to me, and one which created the sensation you experience in a certain type of dream. The sensation that something wholly different from anything you have ever known is about to happen.

This is the idea which suddenly occurred to me as I stood gazing across the Serpentine.

One of the first signs of Christopher's " insanity " had been loss of memory. And, recently, numerous cases had been reported in the newspapers of men and women who had " lost their memories."

Well, I suddenly seemed to see that *there was a connection between these people and Christopher.*

I do not know how long I remained staring across the wind-

ruffled water, but, as I stood there, the certainty widened and deepened that the adventure in which I was so intimately involved was a far more mysterious one than I had ever dared to dream. I felt that great gates were slowly closing on the Familiar and the Known—that a ghostly region, glimpsed only in the strangest dreams, confronted me.

Nevertheless, as I began to walk towards Meridian Square, I was amused by the fact that, sooner or later, every man finds himself faced by his own values. Sooner or later, we are challenged by our own creed. This was happening to me now. I had always believed that the whole art of life is to be prepared for the Unique. I had always held that one is dead, spiritually, the moment one is incapable of unique experience. Well—now—I was confronted by my own creed.

When I reached Meridian Square, I looked round in search of some sign of change. From the day on which I had first seen it, this small secluded Square, which seemed to have been forgotten by some fortunate fluke, had always fascinated me, but, this morning, it had a new quality—the origin of which defied detection.

Feeling somewhat excited, I ran up the seven shallow stone steps of Christopher's house—let myself in—then stopped abruptly in the hall.

Everything was as usual, but I felt as if fetters had fallen from me—fetters of which I had become aware only at the moment of deliverance from them.

I called, "Rosa!" but as there was no reply I ran up the stairs, then opened the door of the Yellow Room.

A man was standing at the window, looking down into the garden.

Directly I saw him, I remembered a drawing I had seen, years ago, of a man at a window. It depicted Goethe, on the Italian Journey, and it revealed the body of a god.

I remembered that drawing the moment I saw this man—standing at the window of the Yellow Room.

I do not know how many minutes passed before he turned and said:

"You are Vincent Drake—my keeper."

Then he came over to me and held out his hand.

"I am Christopher Bell."

Part II

CHRISTOPHER

CHAPTER I

A Walk with Christopher

DIRECTLY I found myself alone with Christopher in the Yellow Room, my first reaction was a feeling of incredulity that any one could have imagined for a single moment that this man was mad. This feeling may have been caused either by his appearance, or by the exhilaration I experienced directly I found myself in his company, or it may have been neither of these. It is not easy to detect the origin of a feeling. All I know is that his presence caused an inner liberation very like that which music creates.

But there was nothing in the least eccentric about him. You could see that he was much more alive than most people, and possessed a vitality wholly different from that state of tension which is nicknamed vitality nowadays, but he was not in the least "queer." He had none of the flourishes of those who parade their "personalities."

He was well over middle height, with a broad, magnificent head, and the widest-set eyes I had ever seen. Very clear, blue eyes. But despite the serenity of his perfectly harmonized features, it was evident that this man had had great experience. Or—at the risk of seeming ridiculous—I would rather say that the face was haunted by the ghost of great experience. His serenity owed nothing to ignorance. It had flowered from great tribulation.

But no description, however detailed, would convey his essential quality—any more than an inventory conveys the essential quality of the house to which it relates. It lists the facts, but it does not evoke the warm living reality.

For instance, to say that Christopher's eyes were the widest-set I had ever seen is an accurate enough physical description, but it conveys no conception of their expression. To me, they were the eyes of a man who had encountered an experience so overwhelming that it had transformed him. Directly I met their full glance, I understood why people thought he was mad.

Probably every one who is transformed by unique experience seems mad. Lazarus probably seemed mad after he had been raised from the dead. And Moses certainly would have seemed mad if he had come down from that mountain, and tried to describe the Promised Land to men who had never known anything but bondage and the wilderness.

After I had shaken hands with Christopher, I discovered that I could not find a single word to say to him, but, oddly enough, this did not embarrass me in the least. I was perfectly content to remain silent—to surrender myself to the exhilaration which his presence created.

Then I made another discovery. *You had to be entirely spontaneous with him.* That may not sound very remarkable, but, actually, it was devastating. After all, with most people, you decide privately what you are going to say and then you say it. You do not speak first, and then find out what you have said. But, with Christopher, you did just that.

For instance, I suddenly heard myself say:

"Arthur Mannering half-believed that you knew he would choose me to be your companion. But that's nonsense. It must be nonsense."

"I didn't know he would find you, but I knew he would find someone I wanted."

His tone implied there was nothing remarkable in the fact that he possessed this knowledge.

"Is it true that you lost your memory?"

"Perfectly true."

The beautifully clear voice held me for a moment, then I asked:

"And you don't remember any of your half-brothers?"

"No, I don't remember them. And, although I've returned, I don't want to meet them yet."

"They'll certainly want to meet you!" I exclaimed. "And so will a great many other people."

"I know they will. But you will tell them that I can't yet. We must get to know each other first. And that may take a little time."

Then he added, in a deeper tone, which moved me profoundly:

"Don't regard me as a kind of freak, Drake. It's all right for some of the others to do that, but not for you."

"Why not for me?"

"You know why."

"You mean, because I got sick of myself some years ago—because I nearly committed suicide?"

"Those are some of the reasons. You've been just as queer as I am in your day." He laughed, then added: "The only difference is that it was transitory with you and it's permanent with me. But never mind all that. Let us be friends. I need you."

"You need no one."

"You're quite wrong. I need no end of people. That was the

first discovery I made when I became—queer. Before then, I thought I could do everything alone."

"Listen!" I almost shouted. "You've got to tell me what did happen to you. I know it must have been something that nearly destroyed you. I can see that. Any one can see that. But you've got to tell me what it was."

"You seem to think it happened only to me. It happens to all sorts of people. There's nothing mysterious about it. It's just something you see."

"Something you—see!"

"Yes. First you keep getting glimpses of it, then you suddenly see it quite clearly—and you go on seeing it. That's why you seem so queer to others. That's why it's better to go away for a time till you learn not to seem so queer."

"Can you tell those who have had glimpses of it—whatever it is?"

"Yes, of course. You've had glimpses of it. That's why you became an artist. Incidentally, you gave up being an artist because you ceased to have glimpses of it."

"You seem to know a great deal about me."

"I do know a good deal. The mad have a very peculiar insight, Drake. They see everything from a unique angle."

He laughed, then went on:

"But we can talk later. Let's go out. It's high time we had a walk together."

Scarcely knowing whether I was awake or dreaming, I went downstairs with him, but, directly we reached the Square, something so remarkable happened that I stood like a man transfixed.

Opposite the house was a plane tree, a little apart from the others, for which I had always had a special affection. It quickened my imagination—and I liked to remember that its ample and symmetrical beauty had existed long before I was born, and would continue long after my death. Often, when walking round the Square with Rosa, I would stop by this plane tree and be grateful for its gracious presence—grateful and glad that it had its own mysterious life, so near to mine, yet so wholly removed. Often, I had been awed by the thought that, if humanity vanished—if there were not an eye to behold its beauty—this tree would lift the lovely burden of its boughs to the sky.

So, if there were a tree in the world which was familiar to me, it was this plane tree in the Square.

Well, as I came out of the house with Christopher, I looked at this tree and I saw—the *life* of the tree. The flame-like life of the tree, from its deepest root to its topmost twig, and the beauty of that

mystery was not to be borne. And I heard the song of the life of the tree, rising to the blue sky, like a lyric of celestial joy.

I stood transfixed till Christopher took my arm, and we walked on slowly through the Square. But, for some moments, I had the very odd feeling that I had had this vision of the tree *only because he was with me—that I had seen Nature, for a fleeting second, as he always saw her.*

I had no time, however, to probe this mystery, for I soon discovered that a walk with Christopher was an entirely different affair from a walk with any one else.

In the first place, he often stopped to speak to a passer-by, and, naturally, I imagined they were people he knew, till I noticed that every one of them turned to gaze at him with an expression of utter bewilderment, directly the conversation ended and Christopher had gone on his way. This interested me, because none of these people showed any surprise on being greeted by him. On the contrary. They welcomed him as if they had half-expected to meet him, and —which was even more remarkable—while they talked with him I seemed to see a resemblance between them. But, directly he went, they gazed after him as if he had been an apparition.

Incidentally, the persons to whom he spoke were a pretty mixed crowd. The first was a chimney sweep; the second was a military-looking man who had just come down the steps of his club; the third was a very pretty girl who was hurrying to some appointment which she evidently did not want to keep; the fourth was an old lady, sauntering along a sunlit side street, with a cat on a lead; the fifth was a prostitute; and the sixth was a bus conductor.

Christopher did not explain why he spoke to these people and I did not ask him, partly because he had the gift of making everything he did seem normal and inevitable, and partly because such odd things were happening to me that I did not feel in the least like talking.

Soon after we left Meridian Square, I began to notice a change in the familiar streets and houses—a new mysterious quality. The passers-by, too, seemed different. It was as if I were seeing everything and every one from a "trick" angle. Now and again, I detected an expression in the face of a passer-by which transformed it, so much so that more than once I nearly stopped to speak to some one whom, normally, I should have passed without noticing.

In fact, I felt a different relationship with all these people who were hurrying along the pavement, or trying to cross the traffic-blocked streets—these harassed drab-looking people, who glanced

apprehensively at every poster, and were unaware of the blue December sky and the frolic delight of the breeze.

I felt a different relationship with these people because I suddenly knew it was not inevitable that they should live these lives in this monstrous city. I knew that they, I, and every one had mistaken a nightmare for reality—and that we had only to desire to wake in order to find deliverance. And, knowing this, everything seemed transformed: fetters became gossamer threads; torturing problems dwindled to spectres. Fears, which had haunted me for years, suddenly had no more reality than a row of grinning gargoyles.

For some moments I experienced a feeling of indescribable lightness, and then I discovered that I wanted to leave Christopher. I wanted to leave him as I had never wanted to leave any one—and I can only suppose he was instantly aware of it, for he stopped abruptly and said good-bye. A minute later he had vanished down a side street.

I found I was in Piccadilly Circus, and I felt I had walked straight out of a dream into the common light of common day.

My next discovery was that I certainly could *not* live with Christopher!

I had tried often enough to imagine how his particular form of madness would affect me, but I had never dreamed for a single second that I should share it! I had discovered, however, that *to be with him involved a change of consciousness.* One became an entirely different person—a person who saw differently, thought differently, felt differently. To live in daily intimacy with him would involve a total transformation of one's whole being. And it would involve being alone—terribly alone.

Well, that wasn't good enough. I found there were quite a lot of things—not particularly pleasant things—which I was not prepared to surrender. In his presence, they ceased to exist, but, now he had gone, they returned—stronger than ever. They surged up from the depths—flaunting their attractions; parading their power; ridiculing resistance.

But, more than anything else, I was scared. Whichever way I worked it out, I was forced to the conclusion that what I had experienced in Christopher's company had been madness—and the possibility of this becoming my permanent state literally terrified me.

I decided to quit, just as quickly as I could.

I hailed a taxi and told the driver to take me to Meridian Square.

Directly I reached the house, I ran to my room—got out suitcases —and began to pack.

I was far too intent on getting away in the shortest possible time

to give a thought to my surroundings, consequently I started violently when I heard Rosa ask casually:

"You're going, then?"

I swung round and faced her.

"You don't seem very surprised!"

"I'm not."

She was wearing a dark dress and stood leaning lightly against the white door, her arms outstretched as if to prevent any one entering.

"I thought you were the one person who would be very surprised."

"I'm not in the least."

"Then there's no need for explanations."

"None."

I was about to go on with my packing, but something in the deep tone of her voice would not let me turn away from her.

"Get this, Rosa!" I said irritably. "I'm not living with a man who makes you as mad as he is when you are with him. That's certain! I've felt pretty odd when I've been with you, but you're a woman—and there's always so much humbug between a man and a woman that you don't have to take any emotion too seriously. But he's different—utterly different! You *know* you're mad when you are with him. And that's not good enough. So I'm going."

"Where?"

"Where! Plenty of places to go to, aren't there?"

"Heaps—for most people. But where is there—for you?"

"I don't know what you are talking about!"

"Didn't you tell me that, if you hadn't become Christopher's companion, you would have committed suicide?"

"Well?"

"Then where will you go when you leave him?"

I don't know why but, directly she said that, I became furiously angry.

"I'll find somewhere! I know where I belong—and it's not here. And now, as I'm going, I may as well tell you some facts about myself. You once said we were alike——"

"We are alike."

"And I half-told you just how alike we are, but it didn't convince you because—later on—you said that no woman could offer me anything which you would not give me."

"That's true enough."

"Is it? Perhaps the word 'anything' doesn't mean the same to you as it does to me."

And then I told her all the sexual insanities to which boredom or

loneliness had goaded me in the past. I don't think I missed anything, and I know I used the crudest possible words to describe the crudest possible things. Many of us have a Chamber of Horrors in our memories, and I took Rosa through mine in such a way that she was not spared the least detail. That took some time, but I remember feeling a fierce pleasure in telling her things I had never told any one —and telling them in terms which left nothing to the imagination.

I ended by saying:

"Perhaps—now—you have some idea of what I mean by the word 'anything.'"

"All that doesn't alter what I said. And you can't say—now—that I don't know what I'm talking about."

She had never seemed so beautiful as she was at this moment—leaning lightly against the door, her arms outstretched, looking at me with luminous grey eyes.

I do not know how long I gazed at her before I turned and began to take things out of the suitcase and put them back into the drawers.

"Staying?"

"Staying!"

A moment later I heard her say:

"Come here, will you?"

I turned, then hurried over to her. She looked so utterly exhausted that I thought she was going to faint.

I half-carried her to a sofa, then made her lie full-length on it.

She closed her eyes and relaxed her whole body in a way which was new to me but which proved very effectual, for, in a few minutes, she was as refreshed and as vital as if she had just wakened from deep sleep.

"You're an incredible person, Rosa. I'm certain you're an adept in black magic."

"White magic."

"Well, I hope it is white magic because, from now on, you take over. You made me stay here and——"

"*Made* you!"

"Certainly!"

"All right. Go on."

"So you are responsible. If I go raving—you're responsible. Whatever I do, you're responsible. And now you tell me this: Just who and what is Christopher? I've tried to work it out. I know his father had genius and his mother had beauty. I know he was brought up outside the collapsed European tradition. Someone told me he had travelled far and wide in the East, and God only knows where, and

that he had been educated by a series of very remarkable men. I know he had the gift of packing the experience of a lifetime into six months. And, because I knew all this, I expeced to find something pretty remarkable, but I certainly did not expect to meet someone who makes you as mad as he is when you are with him. So perhaps you'll tell me what *you* make of him."

"Oh, I don't know. He just seems to me to be a whole person—and most people seem to be in halves, or quarters, or in smithereens."

"But what happened to him, Rosa?"

"How do I know? He may be one of the sons of Adam who have re-entered Eden. The theory was they'd get back, wasn't it?"

"And what about the daughters of Eve?"

"The sons will have to get back first. The daughters don't stand a chance on their own."

"But aren't you afraid, Rosa, of finding yourself in the queer world he seems to live in?"

"I'm afraid of finding myself outside it. And so will you be soon. Anyhow, it's no good trying to understand. Christopher is only one of hundreds."

"Where are the others?"

"Scattered all over the place. You can't dodge them. And you can't escape once you've run into one of them."

"Did you try to escape?"

"Rather! I've forgotten the details, but I know I've been pretty tough in my day. That's why we're alike. There's nothing you've told me, and nothing you could tell, that would be news to me."

A moment later, she added:

"Let's go out. Better take this chance. You're going to be busy. The telephone has done nothing but ring, and it will go on ringing."

"They know he's back, then?"

"Yes, they know."

"Well, when he comes in, I'm——"

"What makes you think he will come in?"

"He's living here now, isn't he?"

"That doesn't mean a thing. He may be away for days, and then turn up when you least expect him. Christopher is like that."

Then she added:

"There will be a lot of changes here. The Greys have gone—they went to-day. You'll see. All sorts of people will probably turn up. Anyway, let's go out now and not bother about anything."

"All right. We'll go out. But you've got to understand this, Rosa. I shall hold you to that offer of yours. From now on you

belong to me. And I shall claim you—directly I've ceased to be in smithereens."

"All right. We'll wait till we're only in halves. Or shall we say quarters?"

"You're in neither, Rosa. You're a whole person."

"Don't you believe it. I often get very odd—especially when the moon's full."

CHAPTER II

Developments

I

Rosa was right about changes at Meridian Square—and she was also right about the telephone. Although Christopher had returned, he was seldom at home during the next few weeks, consequently I was the only link with him. So the telephone bell rang continually.

Buck was the most insistent.

Directly I picked up the receiver and heard his voice, I seemed to see his squat, powerful figure so clearly that I almost felt I was watching him prowling up and down his dimly-lit sitting-room while I listened to an endless account of his endless affairs with women.

Things were bad with Buck financially—"damned bad." And it was all very well for Harold Teasdale to keep on saying that it was madness to raise capital with prices at their present level, but he, Buck, had got to get money. He wanted to go to America for a bit. Things were getting too tough—even for him. Ever since their trip to Paris, Helen had been in a very queer state—almost hysterical. He had turned her over to the Drewsons to see if they could knock some sense into her. Had I heard of the Drewsons?

I told him I had just heard of them from Ethel Mannering.

"Ethel knows them all right—so does Iris. By the way, if you see Ethel or Iris, don't say a lot about me. I was a damned fool to bring them together. Trouble about women is that once they start anything they've no limits. Helen has proved that! But what I really want to know is this: Just how mad did I find Christopher—and is it a fact that he is a vegetarian? If so, that explains everything."

"He seldom eats meat," I replied, "but I've known him eat it."

"When?"

"When he lunched with some cabmen in their shelter."

"Lunched with *cabmen*——"

"In their shelter—the one in Leicester Square. He got friendly with some of them and they asked him to eat with them."

"God Almighty! He must be raving! Lunching with cabmen! Anyway, tell me this. Do you think he's suffering from sex suppression? Ever known him get off with a woman?"

"He spoke to a prostitute once when I was with him."

"So he has lucid intervals, then? But why a prostitute? He could have any woman with his money. Still, it's good news all the same. But this is the point. I've got to get money. Purvis has lent me all he can, but he's pretty broke. Everything is going to hell, if you ask me. Things are dead in the City. But I've *got* to get away. Things are a lot too hot—even for me. So I'm counting on you to touch Christopher. If you knew everything, it would make your hair curl."

So much for Buck!

Then there was Douglas Mannering.

We had met two or three times since our night at The Rat-Hole, but, apart from the fact that his jealousy of Iris was evidently become more frenzied—with the result that he drank harder than ever—there was little to distinguish one meeting with him from another.

When he telephoned, however, it was clear that some change had occurred in his affairs, but he was far too drunk to tell me what it was.

"Listen to me, old boy! You listen to—me! Douglas Mannering. I said—Douglas Mannering! Remember?"

"Of course I remember!"

"'Course you remember! Douglas Mannering—propped up in a bloody telephone box! No room to fall down. Absolutely!"

Then, having given his great shouting laugh, and having made a series of incoherent remarks, he went on:

"And what do you think Douglas Mannering has done?"

I said I had no idea.

"The dirtiest trick of his whole rotten life. That's what he's done. That's why he's drunk. D'you know he's drunk?"

I said it had occurred to me.

"Occurred to you. D'you know I've just been into The Red Star and said to the barmaid . . . D'you know the barmaid in The Red Star?"

"No, I don't know her."

"Well, meet her, old boy, meet her. Got breasts like a curving wave. Absolutely! I said to Kitty . . . I'm damned if I know what I said! Don't know anything! Except that I've done the dirtiest trick . . ."

After a series of noises, he managed to ask:

"Seen Iris? Seen my wife—Iris? Not seen her. And I've not seen her—not for days. And I've not seen the children—not for years. Bloody awful, old boy. You tell Christopher . . ."

And then—silence. Probably there was just enough room for a man to fall down in that telephone box.

Two days later Iris telephoned.

Our conversation would have been more successful, from her point of view, if she had not tried to make it serve antagonistic ends.

All she wanted was to find out what she could—and to tell me certain things—but she attempted to do this in a light social manner which implied that there was nothing she wished to know and had nothing particular to say.

"Too bad we haven't met since that evening at The Tabarin," she announced after formal greetings had been exchanged. "I knew how busy you were so I didn't trouble you. Tiresome, all the same."

Then the husky voice asked, more casually than ever:

"Have you seen my husband lately?"

"Not for a long time."

"Really? I asked because I haven't seen him for some days. But I mustn't bother you with my affairs. I expect Christopher takes up a lot of your time, doesn't he?"

"Quite a lot, one way and another."

"Oh, while I think of it! I don't want to meet Christopher with my husband. I'd much rather see him alone."

"I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

After a pause she asked hurriedly:

"Have you seen Buck lately?"

"Not for weeks and weeks."

"I just wondered. Or—Helen?"

"Not for months."

There was such a long silence that I thought she had rung off, but at last she said:

"We're really broke this time. Only a matter of months, even if we raise capital, which of course we'll have to—whatever Harold Teasdale says. Oh, by the way—I've just remembered something I want to ask you."

"And what's that?"

"Something quite ridiculous, really. You remember that man I spoke to at The Tabarin? I went over to his table—and I left with him and Archie."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, you went to The Rat-Hole with my husband that night, didn't you?"

"Yes, I was there hours with him."

"You didn't tell him I talked to Purvis, did you?"

"Of course not. For one thing, I did not know that was his name."

"It's all ridiculous—quite ridiculous—but my husband gets furious if I see Purvis alone. He doesn't mind if I see him with others."

After a silence she added:

"I tell you all this nonsense because my husband has been very odd lately—more maddening than ever! And it started from that evening at The Tabarin. Did he ask you who I was with—or anything?"

"Yes, he did. I told him you left with some man and Archie."

"Don't mention that little snake! Well—no—I don't quite mean that—but I am rather infuriated with him lately."

She changed her tone and began to talk about Sir Michael, but she only succeeded in deepening the impression that she was very disturbed—if not frightened—by a number of things that had happened recently. And this impression became a certainty when she suddenly exclaimed, apropos of nothing:

"Anything you hear about me is lies! Just lies!"

Then she rang off.

These three telephone conversations were the most dramatic, but others were more mysterious. And, notably, one I had with Ernest Mannering.

We had met only once since the evening on which Ethel had swooped down on us after dinner, and that meeting had not been a success. He had attempted his customary rôle of the foppish, fastidious, cultured Ernest Mannering, but it was a failure because he knew I had seen the real Ernest Mannering—a being consumed by impotent hatred. Consequently, he felt like an actor who had dressed and made-up in full view of the audience before giving his performance.

Ernest telephoned about three weeks after Christopher's return, and started by saying that he did not want to see Christopher yet. That surprised me, as every one was bombarding me to arrange a meeting, but I soon realized that he had very definite reasons for delay. He did not reveal those reasons, because he never made a direct statement, but he indicated their existence in his usual oblique manner.

Coldly, logically, he explained that he had decided on a course of action which, he was convinced, would be approved by Christopher —when all the facts were known to him. Unfortunately some little time would elapse before all the facts would be available. He had

long contemplated this course of action, but had been reluctant to take it as it involved entering into relations with people he was anxious to avoid—and one person in particular.

There was something sinister in the contrast between these pedantic sentences and the effect they created. I felt that his hatred of Ethel was now under perfect control, and that he had peculiar pleasure in revealing this fact to me, as I had seen him mastered by that hatred. Also, although he gave no hint of the action he proposed to take, I felt that its nature gave him perverse satisfaction. There is always something repellent about the acts of a man who loathes action of any kind, and I have never met any one who loathed action so deeply as Ernest Mannering. All he wanted was to lead a frictionless, decorative existence in his little Queen Anne house.

There was a sequel to this conversation because, a few days after it, Ethel telephoned—and made the amazing announcement that Ernest had left the little Queen Anne house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

"Left!" I exclaimed.

"He's living in an hotel. He's been there over a week. And he's not coming back."

Ethel's voice was still rasping and emphatic, but less confident.

"But *why* has he gone?"

"He doesn't say—and he won't answer letters. He's mad, of course. All the Mannerings are mad. It's not only Christopher. We've no money at all—and that fool goes to an hotel. You've not seen him?"

"Not for a long time."

"And he's not met Christopher?"

"No."

"Or—Buck?"

"You're more likely to know that than I am," I replied. "I didn't think he ever saw Buck."

"No, no! Of course not! I wasn't thinking what I was saying. Anyway, he's gone to an hotel, but he'll crawl back."

"Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain!" she exclaimed irritably. "One night they'll forget to put his hot-water bottles in his bed—or his early morning tea will be cold. Then he'll crawl back."

The words were confident enough, but her tone was anything but confident. Something had happened which Ethel did not understand, and she did not like it.

"Anyway, you can tell Christopher that everything Ernest says

is a lie—just a lie! And if you meet the fool, don't tell him you've spoken to me."

"I won't unless he asks."

"He won't ask. Madmen never do what you expect them to do. As I've no doubt you have good reason to know—as you're living with one."

And then she hung up.

Probably I should have tried to devise several possible explanations of the astonishing fact that Ernest had left the Queen Anne house, which was part of his very being—if I had not been interrupted."

Rosa came into the room and announced that Mr. Harold Teasdale was downstairs and seemed most anxious to see me for a few minutes —only a few minutes, because he was leaving for Paris almost immediately.

I decided to see Mr. Harold Teasdale.

II

The lawyer had never been more immaculate, more urbane, more master of himself. Compared with the chaotic Mannerings, he seemed Order incarnate. I was not surprised that his mere presence convinced so many people that all the troubles of the distracted modern world would dissolve like mist, and that Victorian serenities would return.

He watched Rosa go out of the room—made certain she had shut the door—then looked round the Yellow Room with an expression of pained tolerance.

"Do not imagine," The Voice began, "that idle curiosity about Christopher has brought me here. On the contrary. Although he has been living in this house for several weeks, I know he is usually away. For the time being, he prefers to mix with strangers—and to entertain them here. But, I assure you, I have not come to discuss Christopher."

Having thus lightly indicated that he knew almost as much about Christopher's movements as I did, he sat down with his back to the light, crossed his legs, then studied his nails with critical detachment.

I felt that everything was going extremely well with Mr. Harold Teasdale. He seemed to look down on the arena in which lesser mortals scored little victories or went down to black defeat. He dominated his environment, whereas the luckless Mannerings were

dominated by theirs. They were the slaves of circumstance; he was its master. Perhaps that was why he seemed so isolated.

"I said I should detain you for only a few minutes—and I meant precisely what I said."

After a pause he went on:

"What I have come to say can be stated in one sentence. I have come to warn you."

"To—warn me!"

"Yes. And, now, two things. The first is that I want you not only to listen to what I have to say, but to remember it. The second is that I do not want you to press me for explanations. And, if I may add a third point, it is this. My warning does not relate to Christopher or to the people he sees fit to meet. It relates to persons we both know intimately."

He paused impressively, but I said nothing because I realised that he would tell me precisely what he had come to say—and no more.

"Let me put it this way, Mr. Drake. There are circumstances, of which you are ignorant, in the lives of those whom you have met frequently—and who telephone you so persistently. Very involved circumstances. So involved, that it is quite impossible for you to detect the significance of a question you may be asked, or the significance which your reply might contain. So I warn you to exercise the greatest caution in your dealings with these people. Otherwise, you may become involved—and Christopher may become involved—in very unsavoury proceedings."

"I will remember what you have said, but it is difficult to refuse to speak to people on the telephone."

"I agree. But be indefinite and, above all, give no details of any one's movements; or details of the people which any particular person has met."

He glanced at me, then added:

"You know me well enough to realize that I have reasons for making this request."

"I do not doubt that for a second."

"Thank you."

He rose and paced the room several times, his hands clasped lightly behind his back, his thin lips pursed. His manner suggested that he was seeking the best means of making an abstruse legal matter clear to a lay mind.

"It is better to be frank, Mr. Drake. It is always better to be frank when frankness is possible. I have told you that there are very involved circumstances in the lives of certain persons known to both

of us. I will add this. Those circumstances are so involved—and so potentially explosive—that it may be essential for me to reveal them to you. I shall know in a few weeks."

Again he paused. And, again, I realised how adept this man was in creating atmosphere. He had made me feel that, if I continued to ignore him, I should have many excellent reasons for regretting it.

"I shall know in a few weeks," he repeated. "If it should be that I find it essential to tell you certain facts, you would come to my chambers?"

"Certainly," I replied.

"Thank you."

He picked up his hat, umbrella, and gloves, then looked round the room disparagingly.

"Most unsuitable, Mr. Drake. Normality was the note wanted here. Incidentally, I see that the young person who opened the front door still has neither cap nor apron. Unfortunate! By the way, is that young person satisfactory?"

"Very!"

"I am glad to hear it, especially as there is something unusual about her. But that may be an advantage, in view of the kind of people Christopher thinks fit to have here.

When he reached the door he turned—looked me full in the eyes, as he said:

"Christopher is entirely incapable of running his own affairs. I know it. And I hope he will discover it before it is too late."

A minute later I heard his taxi drive away.

This conversation convinced me that Harold Teasdale had greater ability than even I had supposed, but, on reflection, I decided that he probably held some very good cards which I had not seen. Cards which put him in a position of considerable power.

This opinion soon had to be revised, however, because—a few days after Teasdale's visit—I had a somewhat dramatic example of his ability in dealing with a person over whom he could exert no legal pressure.

That person was Rupert Mannering.

I had not seen Rupert since that September afternoon on which he had gone through the letters on my desk. He had seemed extremely worried on that occasion though, outwardly, there had been little change, and, more than once, he had managed to give glimpses of the superman who had patronized me at the little green-and-white house in Highgate.

On this occasion, however, he looked like a ghost and there was not a single glimpse of the superman.

There were no greetings of any kind. Rupert collapsed into a chair, then announced:

"She's gone!"

"Who's gone?"

"Belinda, of course!"

Then he added:

"And it's Christopher's doing."

"What on earth makes you think that?"

"I'm certain he's seen her. That's why he's refused to meet me since he came back."

"But when did Belinda go—and where has she gone?"

"She went a week ago. Just *went*. She did not say one word, and she hasn't written a line. But I've got to find her I've got to!"

"Why? She never meant much to you, did she?"

"That's nothing to do with anything!"

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't; Do *you* know where she is?"

"I haven't a guess."

There was a long silence. Rupert writhed in his armchair, as if he were being thrashed with invisible whips, but at last he said jerkily:

"It's—it's Harold Teasdale."

Before I could say anything, he exclaimed angrily:

"That mad woman went to him some time ago and, ever since, he keeps writing to me. Writes every week! Presses me to give her back her damned money—and her beastly little house!"

"Well, he can't make you, can he?"

"Of course he can't—legally. But he's blackmailing me."

"Blackmailing you!"

"Yes—and damned good he is at it! He knows the kind of background I've got. He knows I give lectures on spiritual subjects. He knows that I have a reputation as a spiritual leader."

"Well?"

"Teasdale keeps hinting that I am the best judge of the effect on my reputation if the truth about my dealings with Belinda became known. He not only hints but he makes it quite clear that the truth *will* become known—unless I return her property."

"Then why don't you return it?"

'Because I've used some of it for my Movement."

"For your——?"

"Movement!" he exclaimed, with immense emphasis. "A spiritual Movement which will be world-wide in a few years."

I knew, of course, that this is an age of megalomania—but I had never run into anything quite like this before. So, as I did not know what to say, I said nothing. But that did not worry Rupert.

A new idea had evidently occurred to him, for he suddenly said with considerable animation:

"Listen, Drake! You know Teasdale and you probably have influence over him."

"Do you think any one has influence over him?"

"You probably have—as you are Christopher's companion. Ask him to go slow with me. Tell him I've a chance of something—if he'll wait."

"It won't be any good telling Teasdale lies."

"It isn't a lie," he said, evidently not in the least offended by my suggestion that it might be. "And you can tell him this too. I'm leaving Christopher alone."

"You mean you don't want to see him—when you've been telephoning me repeatedly to arrange a meeting!"

"It wouldn't be any good—now. He'd guess about Belinda. He's a madman, of course, but it is not easy to deceive him. Anyhow, will you tell Teasdale what I say?"

"If you like, but I can't think why you don't."

"He'll take more notice of you. But you will not repeat a word of this conversation to any one else?"

"Of course not."

"For God's sake pull something off with Teasdale!"

And then he went.

A few minutes later I telephoned Teasdale's chambers and asked if he had returned from Paris. I was told that he had—and that I should be put through to him immediately.

Mr. Harold Teasdale was delighted that I had telephoned and he seemed inclined to consider Rupert's request favourably.

"One must not be hard, Mr. Drake. Times are difficult. And it is probable that our friend Rupert actually has some possibility in view."

"I told him it would be useless to lie."

"That was wise—very wise indeed. Our young friend is not altogether a fool. Whereas Belinda, unfortunately, is. She has made it clear that, when I have recovered her property for her, she intends to administer it herself. That, however, is her affair. I am very much obliged to you. I will consider all this carefully. And, now, have you one more minute to spare?"

"Certainly."

"You remember I told you that it might be necessary for me to reveal certain facts to you. I am now practically convinced that it will be. So let me warn you again to exercise the greatest caution in your dealings with certain people."

CHAPTER III

Parallel Developments

I

It is of course a fact that, at every moment, we live two lives—one concerned with external circumstances; the other with the private world of thought and emotion. And it is this fact which makes a straightforward account of events inadequate, for it omits the thoughts and feelings which accompanied those events—and which need not have been closely related to them. We dream while we act—and the dream is not necessarily the shadow of the action.

This was true in a special sense and for special reasons during the weeks following Christopher's arrival at Meridian Square. So true, in fact, that the developments just recorded were paralleled by other developments—in no way related to them, and far more mysterious.

Everything altered from the moment of Christopher's arrival and continued to alter despite his frequent and prolonged absences. All kinds of people began to visit the house, with the result that I made many new friends, but the change which affected me most intimately was an interior one.

In somewhat the same way as the coming of a new idea revolutionizes a man's mind, by creating a new hierarchy in his thoughts, so the coming of Christopher compelled a regrouping of values. To remain unaffected by him, one had to regard him as mad—and continue to regard him as mad—which is what most people did, with the important exception that they hoped to get something out of him. The exception is important because it created a link with Christopher, however tenuous.

What constituted high adventure for me, however, was the fact that I had surrendered to something I did not understand, and, having surrendered, I experienced the exhilaration and the sudden forebodings which overwhelm an adventurer in regions unknown.

It is a unique sensation to hear the gates of the familiar clang behind one.

But I was aware of this interior change only when I was alone, and that happened seldom during this period, partly because I still had the Mannerings to deal with, but chiefly because of the visitors who now invaded the house—every one of whom had a mysterious

relation to Christopher. But before indicating the extraordinary new life which suddenly surrounded me, I am going to set down the conclusions I had reached about Christopher at this time.

The first bewildering fact I had to recognize was that the problems which oppress us did not seem to exist for him. I do not mean that he had " solved " them. They had become irrelevant. And, in somewhat the same way, I do not believe he saw the world which is so familiar to us, any more than a great artist sees it. He saw a transfigured world and, to be with him, involved sudden glimpses of that world. But, deeper than this, I felt he possessed an intuitive knowledge which seemed miraculous to others only because intuitions have been destroyed, and instincts perverted, in this machinery-maddened age. *I am convinced that people's motives were as clear to him as their features.*

It seemed to me that Christopher, unlike us, never did anything " against his will," because his will, unlike ours, was wholly harmonized. And I believe that he had only to *see* in order to *know*. He did not have to weigh, consider, sift evidence, like we do, to reach decisions which are more often wrong than right. Perhaps, in Rosa's phrase, he had " re-entered Eden," and seemed mad to us only because we were outside. So far outside that glimpses of it seemed as unreal as the landscape of a dream.

But although I felt all this about him, it would not have affected me in the least if he had paraded his power. Had he behaved as if he knew he were a unique being, I should have marked him off as just another modern mystery monger. But he did nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he made you feel that his way of life was inevitable—as inevitable as the swaying of barley in the breeze.

Nevertheless, something deep in me clung desperately to the belief that he was mad. Of all those who came into contact with him, none wished to believe in his madness more ardently than I did.

II

Soon after Christopher's return, so many people drifted in and out of the house that I felt I was living in a club—the kind of club one might visit in a dream. I had not a guess, at any hour of the day or night, whom I should find in the dining-room, or the Blue Room on the ground floor, or the large rambling kitchen in the half-basement. Some of these people dropped in whenever they had an hour to spare; others came once and never returned; and others stayed for a night or a week-end. This was remarkable enough, but what

surprised me more was the ease with which this very mixed collection established relations with one another.

These people had all met Christopher at some time, but they did not refer to him as if he were an oddity, and, when he was present, they talked perfectly freely to him on any subject that happened to turn up. Actually, however, it was not what was said which made this "club" unique, but the atmosphere of brotherhood of which you became aware directly you entered the house. And this atmosphere was not created by elevated conversations about ideals, beliefs, or aspirations, because no one ever mentioned them. The bond between these people was deeper than all that. It was so deep that it was not necessary to discuss it.

One Saturday afternoon at about four o'clock I went into the dining-room, which had been transformed into a kind of miniature café, and discovered a strange assortment of people.

First, there was Linda, a factory girl who usually came on Saturday afternoons, and who was immensely popular. Linda must have been about twenty and had rough yellow hair, dark eyes, and a full humour-loving mouth. She was fond of colour and her rather flamboyant clothes emphasized a remarkably powerful but very attractive figure. Everything about her suggested generosity—the instinctive generosity of a rich nature. Nevertheless, there was something appealing in her—something which tugged the roots of your sympathy. Her attitude on this occasion seemed to represent this dual aspect, for she sat, leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands—listening to the conversation with the whole of her being. This rapt attention was that of a child, and it contrasted strangely with the maturity of her motionless figure.

At another table, a retired Admiral was in animated conversation with a sailor, whom Linda had found somewhere and had brought along. She was always finding men somewhere and bringing them along. Near them was an old lady with a cat on a lead who was talking to a fantastic-looking little man from an antique shop.

But what arrested my attention directly I entered the room was the remarkable fact that the man to whom Linda was listening with such profound attention was—Sir Michael Mannering.

There was Sir Michael, with his white hair and his pink cheeks and his fiery blue eyes and his Wellington nose. And, to complete the picture, a bottle of rum and a carafe of water stood on the table in front of him. There the old man sat—talking explosively to Linda—and looking more like a Viking than ever.

"What on earth are you doing here?" I asked.

This question precipitated a torrent of explanations. Apparently

the old man was here for a dozen good reasons, the chief being that he had run into Christopher in the street recently and had been asked to come to the house whenever he liked. This was his second visit and he proposed to come frequently. He was tired of his club because he knew exactly what every member of it would say on every subject, whereas, here, he met all kinds of quite incalculable people. He would give me an example in a minute. But what mystified him was the manner of his meeting with Christopher. He —Sir Michael—had been walking down Piccadilly, thinking about Magda. Did I remember Magda? Magda was his sister who had died sixty years ago and had left him a fiver a week. Well, he was thinking about her. And then he bumped into someone—and looked up to find himself face to face with Christopher. Damned extraordinary! And he had told Christopher that he did not want anything out of him, but he did think he ought to take over the begging letters which still came by every post. And what did I think Christopher had said? He had told him to turn those letters over to Mary. Did I remember Mary? She was the girl who looked after him. Well, he *had* turned them over to her, and she seemed to know which to answer and which to ignore—and that was an immense relief to him.

Sir Michael handed me a glass of rum and water, then announced that something damned remarkable had just happened.

He went on to explain that this related to Linda, who worked in a factory in which Sir Michael held a thousand ordinary pound shares. He had bought them at par some years ago and had had ten per cent on his money ever since. In other words, he had had a dividend of a hundred a year out of them.

Well, Linda *worked* in that factory—worked in it every day from eight-thirty till five-thirty. But *she* hadn't had a hundred a year out of it. Which seemed damned odd to Sir Michael. And there was this too. He had never given a thought to that factory. The dividend had been sent to Harold Teasdale's office, and the only reason Sir Michael even remembered the name of the company was because it was one of the very few that had made money of recent years. And here was this young lady who *worked* in that confounded factory! He'd never seen a factory in his life—and here was an actual living young lady who worked in one in which he held shares —worked in it day after day, week after week, and who got a damned sight less out of it than he did! And he liked her. He liked her very much. And it seemed all wrong to him that they had not met before. And he was certain—absolutely certain—that there was a conspiracy in this confounded world to prevent people who ought to meet from meeting.

He took a pull at his rum, lit his pipe, then announced that he was going to see how Linda lived, and he was going to show her how *he* lived. All this had made him think a lot. He no longer cared tuppence that he had had to give up his country place in Devonshire. And, if it came to it, he would live on the money Magda had left him.

"Did you say that was five pounds a week?" Linda asked.

"Yes, my dear, five pounds a week."

"What, for doing nothing?"

"Of course! What do you think! That's very little. I used to have twenty thousand a year."

"How much is that a week?"

"You tell her, Drake. I never was any good at figures."

"It's about four hundred pounds a week," I said, after a bit of a mental struggle, because I am not too good at figures myself.

Linda stared at us. At last she turned to Sir Michael and said:

"You're lucky. I suppose you've been all over the world, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have."

"I've never been out of England—'cept once, when I went to Boulogne for four hours."

The old man shot to his feet with remarkable agility.

"You hear that, Drake? Four hours in Boulogne! That's all she's seen! That's how we waste people! Any ninny could see that there's stuff in this girl. Real stuff! Come here, my dear."

Linda rose and went to him, then the old man turned her round for my inspection, as if he were a horse fancier exhibiting the points of his favourite mare, while Linda laughingly submitted—her hands clasped behind her head.

"Look at these shoulders, Drake! Look at this back and those hips! She's put together like a masterpiece. She'd have a brain as good as her body—if they'd given her a chance."

"Well, *you* give her a chance!" Linda exclaimed. "You can tell her no end she doesn't know."

"Very well, young lady. You come to my house and I'll show you photographs of my travels and tell you about the places I've been to. And then you're going to show me where *you* live."

He turned to me, then added:

"This may fit in very well. Mary is going to marry some fellow she met at Beulah Island, so, if this young lady and I get on together, I may ask her to take Mary's place. I won't have ninnies near me. That's certain."

Then he said to Linda:

"Can you do what you're told?"

"I've always had to."

"Then you'll probably mix rum properly."

A few minutes later he left with Linda, and I went to the large rambling kitchen where various people were helping Rosa to get tea.

I am convinced that, from the moment of Christopher's return, the house was under a spell which transformed every one who came under its influence. This is the only explanation of the extraordinary fact that social barriers between people collapsed like the walls of Jericho directly the threshold was crossed. Intimate relationships established themselves with an air of inevitability. Men and women of every class suddenly ceased to be aware of superficial distinctions, with the result that they met on the basis of absolute equality. Directly you entered the house in Meridian Square you felt you had become a member of a creedless religion, and this feeling of kinship not only transformed social relations but it created a spirit of spontaneity which made the most ordinary happenings seem festive.

It would suddenly occur to Rosa that it might be a good idea to have some food, whereupon she would collect the various people in the house—find out what they wanted—then send some of them to the shops to get supplies. Every one helped to prepare the meal and every one gave a hand when it was over. We had marvellous evenings together.

"I can't make them out," I said to Rosa one night when we were alone. "I'm damned if I know whether I'm in an asylum, or a kind of celestial kindergarten."

"Celestial kindergarten isn't too bad," she said slowly. "I suppose that's what this is really. Or you can say, if you like, that it's an inn on the road to Beulah Island."

"And just how many people, Rosa, do you think there will be in Beulah Island—eventually?"

"Well—eventually—the whole world will be Beulah Island. Either that, or it will blow itself to bits."

"And which do you think is more probable?"

"It all depends on which people want," she replied. "If they want Beulah Island, they'll get it. And if they want to be blown to bits, they'll be blown to bits."

"They'll all tell you they don't want that."

"No, they don't want to be blown to bits, but a lot of them want things which make that inevitable. Still, there is no use guessing about which will happen. And now, tell me this. You've been pretty busy on the telephone, haven't you?"

"Have I not! It's impossible to describe how queer it seems to be living the kind of life we live here—and then to pick up the

receiver and find oneself in the Mannering arena. It's like being a liaison officer between two worlds."

"Which is just what you are! Or perhaps you're a recruiting officer for the Ark."

"Is there an Ark?"

"I hope so," she replied, "because there's certainly going to be a Flood. In fact, it's started—it's raging—though scarcely any one has put up an umbrella yet."

"That's all very well, Rosa, but you may be mad—and Christopher may be mad."

"No more mad than old Noah seemed when he started hammering away at that Ark. I bet he began on a blazing summer afternoon, and all his friends said: 'Heard about Noah? He's gone crackers.' And then they looked up—and saw that the heavens had opened."

After a pause, she went on:

"It's getting late. Which do we do: go to bed, or walk once round the Square?"

"We walk once round the Square."

Two days later, I was standing at the window in my room, looking down into the garden. It was one of those rare February afternoons which, except for the bareness of the boughs, create the illusion that summer has come. A still, warm, sunny afternoon, with a hint of fragrance in the breeze, and a powder-puff cloud in an Indian-blue sky.

I stood at the open window, lulled by the loveliness of the day, when I heard voices in the garden below. I looked down and saw Rosa and Christopher pacing the lawn together. Her hand rested lightly on his arm, and, as I watched them go to and fro, I was enchanted by the grace of their movements. No man and no woman, known to me, had ever walked the earth like that.

At one moment they seemed like beings from another planet who had suddenly appeared in a Knightsbridge garden; then I felt I was watching a rendezvous between Genius and Beauty. The strangest thoughts came to me as I watched them go to and fro.

After a while they stopped and stood facing each other while Christopher explained something to Rosa, and—to illustrate his meaning in visual terms—he made movements with his hands as if to indicate the shape of his thoughts. And then they both laughed.

As the sound of their laughter rose to me I knew that Joy—the loveliest of earth's exiles—had returned to the world. I knew this with certainty, although I remained aware of the multiplying fears and hatreds which fetter and bind us. I knew that Joy had returned.

Some days passed before I found myself alone with Christopher,

partly because there were many visitors during this period, and partly because telephone conversations occupied much of my time. But late one night I heard him go into his room and, as he did not shut his door and as mine was open, I could hear him moving about although we were separated by the Yellow Room.

As the clock in the hall downstairs struck three, he came into my room and, directly I saw him, I knew he had not the least intention of going to bed.

"This is the second time we've been alone together," I said, with the spontaneity which his presence always evoked.

"Yes, the second time." Then he added: "You've a lot of books here. I was looking at some of them the other day."

"Why did you come here to-night?"

"To answer some of the questions you've stored up for me—and to thank you for shielding me from the Mannerings. I'll meet them, when the time comes."

He was sitting in an armchair, leaning forward—his elbows resting on his knees, his fingers interlocked. As I watched him, I made the gradual discovery that his appearance never became familiar. No matter how often you met him, you always felt that you were seeing him for the first time, and I suppose this was because you became aware of a different aspect of his appearance on each occasion. For instance, as I watched him to-night, I realized how ceaselessly that well-knit body of his had wandered about the world. I have travelled quite a bit in my day and so I know the signs when I see them. But about the mental journeys of this man I had not a guess.

"How do you know I've been storing up questions for you?"

"I felt it. I've felt it for some time."

"I don't believe some of the things you say!" I exclaimed angrily. "I don't believe a word of them!"

"When do you think I lied?" he asked in the same even tone.

"Yesterday—when you were talking to that sailor. You talked to him as if you and he had been shipmates."

"Well, why not?"

"I thought you had lost your memory. You said you had—so how do you remember the time when you were a sailor?"

"I don't remember details of voyages—names of ships—and so on. But what the sea meant to me, what it gave to me, I'll never forget. Surely you, of all men, understand that!"

"Why should I understand it any more than any one else?"

"I'll tell you. I was in here the other day when you were out. I took down a couple of your books and glanced at them. The first was a volume of Tchehov's plays. The marked passage which caught

my eye was something like this. A young girl says to an old man: 'Did you love my mother very much?' And he replies: 'Yes, very much.' Then the young girl asks: 'And did she love you?' And the old man says: 'I don't remember that.'"

He paused, then went on:

"The other book was by Léon Bloy. The sentence you had marked was this: 'Suffering passes away—but to have suffered never passes away.' It's all in that. There's no mystery about it. We remember essentials—because they become part of us. What do details matter? I've forgotten more details than most people. That's all."

"It isn't all!" I exclaimed angrily. "You have an extraordinary effect on people, and you know it. You alter them. You give them new thoughts and feelings—you revolutionize them. Look at the people who come here! *You've* altered them."

"Will Buck alter when I meet him?"

"I doubt it."

"Or Harold Teasdale?"

"Nothing would alter him."

"Then perhaps I don't change people—perhaps I meet those who are changing."

"I suppose Rosa has told you about Buck and Teasdale," I said, after a silence. "I've told her plenty about them."

"Yes, she told me something."

He rose, crossed to the window, then drew the curtain.

"Shall we go out, Drake? Or are you tired? The moon is full and it's very lovely."

"Do you ever sleep?"

"Yes, of course. But not for hours on end. I sleep when I want to—for an hour or so, at any time of the day or night. But perhaps you are too tired to go out."

"I'm not tired," I said. "Let's go out."

A few minutes later we left the house.

The radiance of the moon flooded the city, casting jet shadows on deserted streets. Flimsy clouds flitted across the splendour of the sky. For some distance, our echoing footsteps were the only sound, then a taxi went slowly by and, later, a little group of people passed us, caricatured by their shadows.

But before long I was as unaware of my surroundings as a sleep-walker—and I doubt if any sleep-walker ever had a dream stranger than the one which came to me as I walked the London streets with Christopher. A dream so overwhelmingly real that, long after it had ended, I felt I was separated from it by a stride, and, to this day, I often feel that I have only to turn the corner of the street to find

myself in that city which emerged magically from a moonlit London.

At first I had only glimpses of this city—glimpses which died at the instant of their birth, like matches struck in a storm. Then visions of it became more frequent and of longer duration till I seemed to stand in the centre of the city.

It was ringed with rolling hills and, on the lower slopes, ascending rows of white terraced houses shone in the sunlight. The green summits of these circular hills were dotted with sheep, and every now and again I saw the crystal flash of a falling stream. Wide streets were lined with blossoming cherry trees, and from green-shuttered houses came the sound of singing or laughter.

Unknown flowers flamed in countless gardens—the diamond-clear air was soft with the fragrance of spring—a blue sky, flecked with feathery clouds, glowed overhead.

The beauty of the men and women—the serenity of their perfectly harmonized features—the grace of their movements in lovely flowing clothes—so enchanted me that I stood spellbound like a man on the frontier of paradise. Above the musical murmur of the life of the city rose the laughter and cries of children playing in sunlit gardens, or exploring the green shade of the woods.

Then all vanished as if a sudden curtain had descended. I was alone, in Hyde Park, and dawn was breaking.

I walked round the Serpentine, scarcely aware of my surroundings, for the city I had seen was still more real than the actual world. Even when I returned to Meridian Square, some hours later, I was still haunted by the vision of that sunlit city ringed with rolling hills.

Eventually it became less insistent, however, and this process was hastened by finding a note on my desk in the Yellow Room. It was a telephone message from Harold Teasdale, asking me to go to his chambers at three o'clock on the following Saturday afternoon to discuss a matter of some urgency.

CHAPTER IV

Revelations

NOTHING had altered at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The mellow house in which Mr. Harold Teasdale performed his professional duties still suggested a serener age. There it stood in the misty sunshine, set back in proud seclusion behind iron railings and the unevenly paved courtyard. You had only to set foot on the stone path leading to the entrance in order to feel slightly vulgar. There was something disconcerting in the detached and dignified regard of the aristocratic house. The nearer you approached it, the more convinced you became of your insignificance.

I pushed open the heavy door and entered the perpetual twilight of the hall, but, on this occasion, the commissionaire did not emerge from his sentry box near the bottom of the shallow stairs, presumably because on Saturday afternoons he fled to other activities nearer the heart's desire.

I made my way up the stone stairs, hollowed by pilgrim feet, then opened the door on which ENQUIRIES was painted, and found myself confronted by the willowy gentleman of about fifty, who obsequiously conducted me to Harold Teasdale's private office.

The lawyer—having greeted me with a restrained cordiality, which implied that this was no ordinary meeting—then told the willowy gentleman he could go home as his services would not be required. A few minutes later, the ENQUIRIES door closed behind the departing clerk, leaving Teasdale and me and Silence alone together in the private office. Teasdale sat at the table near the window: I occupied a spacious armchair facing the light: Silence stood between us like an invisible presence. The rare prints on the wall looked down on us. The whole house seemed to be listening.

At last Teasdale rose, then stood with hands clasped behind his elegant back, gazing down at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"I am about to break a rule of nearly forty years' standing."

After an impressive pause, he proceeded to give an address on the unique relations which exist between a lawyer and his clients. A most remarkable address. So remarkable, that it seemed little short of tragic that he had an audience of only one, and a layman at that. His address had the dignity, precision, and clarity of a

definitive statement by an eminent authority on a subject of perennial professional importance.

He ended by saying:

"Other men who betray secrets confided to them may do so with calculable results, but the effects of a lawyer violating the confidences of his clients are incalculable. The lawyer is a lay priest—his private office is a lay confessional. His relations with those who consult him are, therefore, unique. If mutual trust is undermined, everything collapses."

"And yet you propose to break a rule of forty years' standing?"

"That is why I have asked you to come here to-day."

He made a movement with his hands, then he said:

"I am no Jesuit—far from it—but I believe the Jesuits hold it justifiable to commit a small offence in order to avert catastrophe."

He sat down at the table, turned towards me, then said in an incisive tone which was a marked contrast to his previous one:

"I am risking little, however. It is essential that I tell you certain facts about certain of my clients. But I am a judge of character—and I know I can trust you. I do not think that—I know it."

I bowed, as he seemed to expect me to do something, then he continued:

"Now, Drake, you are an acute observer, consequently you will have guessed certain of the facts I am going to reveal. But it is their relation to other facts—of which you are ignorant—that is all-important."

He paused, then added:

"Let me put it like this. You have seen certain pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. I have all the pieces. I am going to put them together now—so that you can see the whole picture."

It is always interesting to watch a man at work on his own job. On former occasions, I had met Teasdale as a man rather than a lawyer, but—now—he was about to reveal an intricate situation from his point of view, in terms intelligible to me, and it was remarkable how everything about him reflected this change of rôle.

"There are one or two preliminaries," he began, "and the first is this: Have you heard of the Drewsons?"

"I just know the name," I replied. "One night, when I was dining with Ernest Mannering, his wife turned up unexpectedly after dinner. She stayed only a short time because she was going on to the Drewsons'."

"Do you remember her exact words?"

"They were to the effect that the Drewson parties were quite fun, but that, if she did not get away by four o'clock, they would have

to give her a bed. I happen to remember her saying this because I felt that she knew she was sleeping out—and wanted to indicate the fact to her husband."

"Thank you. As I said just now, you are an acute observer. Now, note this. It is generally believed that the Drewsons are married. Actually, however, they have lived together for five years."

For some moments there was silence. Teasdale was a study in concentration as he sat gazing at the wall opposite, and, as I watched him, I again felt that I should be sorry to have this man for an adversary on his own ground.

"There are other preliminaries," he said at last. "It is essential for you to realize the psychological background of the remarkable situation which I have to reveal. First, however, I will tell you the names of those implicated in that situation."

He turned towards me and, as he said each name, he extended a finger to represent the person mentioned.

"Buck. Douglas Mannering. Ernest Mannering. Drewson. Purvis. Have you heard of Purvis?"

"Yes, I've heard of him," I replied.

"Those are the men. Here are the women. Iris Mannering. Ethel Mannering. The Drewson woman. And a girl called Helen —whom you have met."

He gave me a few moments in which to visualize the persons named, then he went on:

"We need not discuss Buck, because you know all about him. And you know Douglas Mannering. You know his passionate temperament—the extent to which he drinks—and his jealousy of Iris. Ernest Mannering you also know. A feminine nature—brought up by a maiden aunt—and a fanatical woman-hater. As to Purvis and Drewson, they are sexualists—less obvious ones than Buck, but more depraved. So much for the men."

He rose, paced the room slowly two or three times, then returned to his chair.

"As to the women," he continued, "you know all about Helen. Buck, doubtless, has told you his relations with her—and that he is an old friend of her parents. He is very indiscreet. As to the Drewson woman, she does not matter much—you'll see why later. Iris, as you have doubtless guessed, was promiscuous from the cradle. Your evening with her at The Tabarin made that clear, I imagine?"

"Yes, pretty clear," I replied.

"That leaves Ethel Mannering. She is more complicated and therefore more interesting. You gathered, of course, that she married

Ernest only because he had money—and that she has an absolute contempt for him?"

"Yes, I gathered that."

"You may or may not know that, some years ago, she was divorced in very unsavoury circumstances. Still, Ethel knows the world. She has an efficient, practical side. Also, she has insight. Directly she saw Ernest, she recognized a victim. But the kind of man she admires—and the kind of man she needs—is a Buck or a Purvis. Preferably the latter. You can imagine, therefore, her contempt for the impotent Ernest."

He made an expressive movement with his hands, then continued:

"That is the psychological background. And *this* is the actual situation. The two Mannering women and the girl, Helen, are wholly under the influence of Buck, Purvis, and Drewson. So much so, that they are the slaves of these men. But note this carefully. These women are never alone with the men. Ethel, for instance, would never go alone to Purvis's flat. Parties are given—usually at the Drewsons'—at which all these people are present. Those parties are orgies, of course. But, to Ernest or Douglas, they probably seem innocent enough. Seven people meet at a flat. What could there be in that? Especially as one of the men—Buck—is a relative. Also, Mrs. Drewson is present—and why should Ernest or Douglas know that she is not married to Drewson? So her presence suggests respectability. How should they guess that she is more abandoned than the men?"

I was about to speak, but Teasdale stopped me.

"One moment. Iris used to mask her many affairs by surrounding herself with effeminate young men like Archie, whom you met. But the Drewson mask is much more effective. It is so effective, that her husband half-thinks she has reformed—so far as Douglas is capable of any thought of any kind."

"But I thought that, at one time, Iris and Ethel disliked each other and did not meet?"

"That's perfectly true, Drake, but Buck effected a reconciliation at his flat—in the crudest manner imaginable. As to Helen, at first she had some limits, but, after her trip to Paris with Buck, she had none. And, now, she would not dare to have any. I repeat: these women are the slaves of those men."

He laughed abruptly, then said:

"That is the situation, Drake. It has been the situation for some time. You will agree that it is a very modern one—and one which is more common than many well-meaning but ignorant people imagine."

It is difficult to convey the impression created by Teasdale's manner as he made these revelations. His rapid, incisive speech—his concentrated energy—the icy amusement he derived from certain parts of his narrative—were in such total contrast to his theme that the effect was repellent. But, to me, there is always something inhuman in the marshalling of facts divorced from the passion, the weakness, and the suffering which those facts represent. That, however, is precisely what Teasdale did—and with an ability which I cannot reproduce. I can see him now, quite clearly, sitting at that table. I can see his narrow head, the prominent chin and cheek-bones, the bold, probing eyes, half-hidden by heavy lids. He hovered above the situation he had described like a hawk, and, like a hawk, he missed nothing.

At last I said:

"There is one thing I want to know more than anything else."

"And that is?"

"How do you know all this?"

"I know it because it became necessary for me to know the facts."

"Why?"

"Because, several weeks ago, Ernest Mannering instructed me to have his wife, Ethel, shadowed—as he had decided to divorce her directly he had the necessary evidence."

I tried to speak, but he stopped me.

"He did more. He persuaded his brother, Douglas, when the latter was drunk, to agree that *his* wife—Iris—should also be shadowed. At Ernest's expense, of course, as Douglas has literally not a shilling."

I stared at him. This was the reason, then, why Douglas had told me on the telephone that he had just done "the dirtiest trick of his whole rotten life."

"There's one thing I don't understand at all," I said slowly, "and it's this. If Ernest wants to obtain evidence for a divorce, why did he leave home? Surely, by doing so, he put Ethel on her guard?"

"There are two answers, Drake, and there may be a third. One is that Ernest may find it a physical impossibility to be in Ethel's presence. She humiliates him—when they are alone—to an extent you could hardly imagine. The second possible reason is this. Ernest has the insight which belongs to hatred. He may guess that Ethel is incapable of breaking off relations with these men. If so, he is right, because she *is* incapable—quite incapable."

"And the third reason?"

"I never assume that a client has told me everything. Why did Ernest suddenly become suspicious of the Drewson parties? Or has

he always been suspicious? If so, why has he suddenly decided to act? Has he grounds for suspicion other than the Drewsons? I do not know the answers to these questions, and so I assume that Ernest has not told me everything."

"Have you told him what you have just told me?"

"No, I have not."

"You said it was several weeks since he instructed you to have Ethel shadowed. Surely, then, he has asked what discoveries you have made?"

"On several occasions. I had to proceed with some subtlety, Drake. I have many interests to consider—including Christopher's. I assure you that, if this case comes to court, the revelations would be such that the Mannerings and Teasdales would be ruined. And, in saying that, I have not forgotten the laxity of modern standards."

"So you had to proceed with subtlety?"

"Certainly. Clearly, I had to obey Ernest's instructions. Ethel and Iris were therefore shadowed. Let us call the person who shadowed them Mr. A. In due course, he reported that Ethel and Iris and the girl, Helen, frequently visited the Drewsons when Buck and Purvis were there. These reports from Mr. A. were shown to Ernest—and they told him what he already knew. No more and no less."

Teasdale rose, adjusted his perfectly-fitting morning coat, then began to pace the room with hands lightly clasped behind his back.

"It was essential for *me* to know the facts, Drake. There is a man I sometimes employ on intricate negotiations. Let us call him Mr. B. I may say that I have the best of reasons for trusting him. The best of reasons. He is a man of experience and considerable ability. He discovered the facts which I have revealed to you."

"It would interest me to know how he did it."

"Would it? Then I will tell you. To obtain information, two things are necessary. To find someone who possesses it, and to be in a position to bring pressure on that person to disclose it. If that person is in great need of money—and is inexperienced and hysterical—naturally the task will be easier."

"You mean—Helen?"

"Precisely. As you know, she is extremely extravagant. She is inexperienced and, lately, she has been very hysterical. Very hysterical indeed. So much so that, recently, Buck became nervous—and turned her over to the Drewsons for special treatment. Whether that treatment has proved efficacious, I do not know."

He gave his abrupt laugh, then continued:

"I should like to convince you that Mr. B. did his work very

thoroughly with Helen. And perhaps you will be convinced when I tell you that Mr. B. discovered that, some months ago, you lent Helen fifty pounds."

I jumped as if he had pushed a pin into me. It was perfectly true that, some months ago, I had had such a desperate letter from Helen that I had lent her fifty pounds—which had not "saved" her, despite the repeated assurances in her letter that it would.

"I see you are convinced," Teasdale went on. "Mr. B. has his own methods, and I am satisfied that he has elicited all the facts known to Helen."

"And how much longer do you think you will be able to withhold those facts from Ernest?"

"I hope never to disclose them. I repeat: this case must not come to court. We need not descend to details, but I assure you that they are worse than your worst imaginings. This case must *not* come to court, Drake. Do not forget that I am a Teasdale. The Teasdales and the Mannerings are so closely inter-related that they are practically one family. This scandal would spare none of us."

"Then how is it to be prevented?"

"The solution is money."

He returned to the table, sat down, then turned to me and repeated:

"The solution is money. I am well aware that Ernest hates Ethel, but the real reason why he wants to divorce her is because it is imperative for him to marry a woman with money. His income is greatly reduced. He can no longer afford his little Queen Anne house. To marry money is the traditional Mannering way of escaping from financial difficulties. Your friend, Arthur Mannering—who is now in America, seeking a rich bride—is another example. If Ernest had money, he would make Ethel an allowance and get rid of her. He loathes all women and would therefore infinitely prefer not to marry. But it is absolutely essential for him to get money—and the only way in which he can do so is to marry a rich woman."

"Or live on capital," I suggested.

"With prices at their present level, that would be suicide, Drake. Every day clients pester me to raise capital. But I refuse to let them ruin themselves. It would be, literally, suicidal."

After a silence, he said:

"Now, I do not want to confuse you—and please note that what I am going to say is irrelevant to the main issue. But I want you to consider Iris's position. She has the money. Her husband, Douglas, has none. Iris has already hinted to me that she is considering divorcing Douglas. She imagines this would be easy, in

view of Douglas's affairs with barmaids. Someone has put her up to this, of course. Probably Buck, who is also very short of money. You can see the complications which would ensue if Iris *did* attempt to divorce Douglas—in view of the facts in my possession about *her*. Facts which I should have to disclose to him, as they were obtained as a result of his instructions. No, Drake, there must be no divorce proceedings—by Ernest, or Iris, or any one else. The solution is money."

"You really believe that—if the money difficulties of these people could be solved—their present relations could continue indefinitely?"

Teasdale was quite sure of it. He had very considerable knowledge of the intimate affairs of a great number of people, and he could assure me that all kinds of intricate sexual relationships remained undetected by those nearest to them and most affected by them. What brought these relationships to light was lack of money—and that was why, nowadays, there were so many scandalous revelations. Given money, a façade could be presented to the world. Lacking money, facts became visible. He was quite certain he was right.

"Very well," I said, "let us assume you are right. Let us assume that money would save the situation you have revealed. Where, exactly, do you imagine it is coming from?"

"From Christopher, of course."

"You're not serious?"

"Perfectly serious."

"What has Christopher to do with these people—and the kind of lives they evidently want to live?"

"He's the half-brother of the two men most deeply affected. Do you suggest that the family honour is of no account to him?"

"I don't see much evidence of family honour in what you have just told me. You said that money would enable these people to continue their present relations. Well, do you imagine Christopher will be interested in financing a brothel?"

He gazed intently in front of him for some moments. It was evident that he was assessing the advantages of several different replies.

At last he said:

"You may think that will be his reaction, but you cannot know it. It is your duty to tell him what I have told you."

"I'll tell him. He may know it already."

"That is quite impossible."

"Are you certain? He has been told something of the lives of the people we have been discussing. He needs to know very little in order to see—everything."

Teasdale tried to speak, but I stopped him.

"One minute. Ask yourself some questions. Of all the people clamouring to see him, how many have succeeded? Why is it he is never in when they turn up at Meridian Square? Do you think it coincidence? Why does he associate with people entirely different from the Mannerings—people with different desires, different hopes, different needs? When has Christopher ever had anything in common with the Mannerings? And just why is it that it never occurs to the Mannerings that *they may seem mad to Christopher*?"

"You have courage, Drake. If you are aware of *all* the risks you are taking, you have exceptional courage. That, however, is not my affair. I have told you certain facts and have asked you to make them known to Christopher—in the strictest confidence, needless to say. If you do not do so—or if you tell him and he ignores those facts—I shall avert a catastrophe for as long as I can. That will probably be three months, at the most. Think over what I have said. What I have revealed has probably been a shock to you and——"

"Not in the least," I cut in. "The Mannering affairs are no more chaotic than those of the political, economic, or social worlds. Everything is makeshift, bankrupt, or perverse nowadays."

I rose, then added:

"Before I go, there's one question I would like to ask."

"And that is?"

"Why didn't you tell Christopher what you have told me this afternoon?"

"That, surely, is quite simple. I know you—and I do not know him, although I have met him, of course. Also, do you imagine I am going to join the crowd who plot and plan to see him? You, evidently, think highly of his intuitive faculty. I, too, have my intuitions—although that is a word which, normally, I do not use. I shall meet Christopher when it is necessary for me to meet him. There is no doubt about that."

Then, with a total change of manner, he rose and came over to me. He had become the Harold Teasdale of our former meetings in less time than it would have taken to change his coat. The Voice returned. So did the statuesque attitudes and the mask-like imperturbability of the features. This was the Harold Teasdale who seemed a survival of high tradition—and you had only to glance at him in order to understand why so many people were convinced that all must be well with the old order, despite endless underground rumblings.

He took my arm and we went down the stairs together. When we reached the courtyard, he stopped and looked at the sky.

"A very pleasant afternoon, Drake. A trifle misty perhaps, but pleasant. As you know, I frequently spend Saturday afternoons and Sundays here. I do not regret it. It is peaceful—and there are no interruptions."

I made no comment, and a minute later he said:

"You will be interested to hear that our friend Rupert's affairs are improving. He has interested another maiden lady, of some means, in his spiritual activities."

"Does that mean that Belinda will get her money back?"

"She has already had some. Incidentally, no one knows where she is. I have only a forwarding address. But the point is that Rupert is not a fool. Still, possibly, you will be relieved to hear that the new lady's affairs are in my hands."

"What relieves me is that Belinda has got some money back."

We shook hands, and I left him.

CHAPTER V

Encounters

I

PLENTY of people have sleepless nights because they are worried, but it sometimes happens that one is unable to sleep for no ascertainable reason. At least, that is my experience. And the strange thing about these isolated nights of insomnia is that they are usually heralded not only by a longing for sleep, but by the certainty that it will descend instantly—and that it will be long and sound and deep. You hurry into bed, switch off the light, only to discover that you are wide awake—and that you are going to remain wide awake till dawn.

Shortly after my meeting with Teasdale I had one of these nights. For hour after hour I lay in the darkness, waiting for the clock to strike, until at about six I managed to sleep—and dreamed abominably.

The result was that I did not get up till ten, and it was a full hour later when I went into the Yellow Room to deal with the pile of letters awaiting me.

I suppose I had glanced at half a dozen of them when the door was flung open—and Buck rushed into the room.

"You can cut the chat," he announced breathlessly. "I've got to get out of this country—and stay out for quite a while. And I've got to go at once. D'you understand? *At once!*"

I tried to say something, but he waved me aside.

"Yes, yes, I know!" he exclaimed. "Very tragic and all that! But I've no time for melodrama. I've got to go abroad. And I haven't the money. And there are bills I *must* pay before I go. I've got to get five hundred quid. And get it now! God, I never thought I'd get into a jam like this!"

He made a jerky movement with his hands, then raced on:

"Now look here. You've got to do something for me—and do it at once. You must tell Christopher that he's got to let me have five hundred quid to-day. This morning! If he doesn't——"

He broke off abruptly, for he realized that I was looking, not at him, but at someone behind him.

He turned round—and saw Christopher standing in the doorway.

The sudden transition from the shouting of Buck to an absolute silence had an almost hypnotic effect. In an instant, the room seemed under a spell which made speech or movement impossible. The atmosphere was taut with expectation.

Outwardly, there was nothing in the least dramatic—unless it were the physical contrast between Christopher and the squat Buck with his gorilla-like arms—nevertheless I felt that a curtain had risen on a scene in a play. A scene I was watching, and one in which I was playing a part.

At last Buck turned to me and said angrily:

"You arranged this!" Before I could speak, he went on: "Yes, you did! I've tried to fix a meeting with Christopher again and again—and you've stopped it. D'you think I don't know why? And d'you think I don't know why you've let us meet now?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

He came nearer to me.

"I'll damned soon tell you what I'm talking about! Do you think every one doesn't know why Arthur Mannering gave you the job as companion at your famous meeting in the Place du Tertre? To safeguard his interests with Christopher! That's why you've taken damned good care that none of the family should see Christopher! You're out to discredit every one of us. Every one—in turn! And that's why you've arranged this meeting this morning."

"If that's so," I said, "perhaps you'll tell me how I knew you would come here this morning?"

"You guessed I'd come here—directly you saw the morning paper."

"I haven't seen the morning paper."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care tuppence whether you believe it or not. I slept late—and I have not seen the morning paper."

Buck turned to Christopher.

"I suppose you haven't seen it either?"

"No, I haven't," Christopher replied. "I often don't see a paper for days together."

Buck stood, looking from one to the other, then banged his fist on the desk and shouted:

"You both know what's happened to Helen!"

"We haven't the slightest idea," I began, but he cut in:

"You know she committed suicide last night. Don't stare at me! You know she threw herself out of the window at the Drewsons' flat—soon after midnight last night."

Then he shouted with almost falsetto intensity:

"Why the hell do you pretend that you *don't* know?"

I was about to speak, but a glance from Christopher stopped me.

Buck began to stride up and down the room, talking as if he found relief in saying aloud what had repeated itself over and over again in the privacy of his own mind.

"Bit of luck I wasn't there! Marvellous bit of luck! Iris and Ethel had been at the Drewsons' most of the evening. They joined Purvis and me just before midnight. Soon after they turned up Drewson telephoned and told me what had happened. And the damned fool suggested that I should tell Helen's people! He said I was the one to tell them because I'd known them for years."

"Who did tell them?" Christopher asked.

Buck came to a standstill.

"What? Who? Why, the police—of course! At least, I suppose so. What the hell does it matter who told them?"

He began to stride up and down again, muttering to himself.

When he was able to speak coherently, I believe he had forgotten our presence, because he entirely ignored us as he paced to and fro, enumerating points in the situation in order to convince himself that he had not overlooked one which menaced him.

"Iris and Ethel will have to go to the inquest. And the Drewsons, of course. I wasn't there, so I shouldn't have to go. All the same, I'm not risking it. And I'm not seeing her people. That's certain. I wish to God I could remember whether I ever wrote to her! Not just notes—but about anything that mattered. I can't be certain, damn it! Anyway, she wouldn't have kept the letter. So *that's* all right. The chief danger is Iris. She's got a hell of a wind-up. She might say anything. But the Drewsons will whack some sense into her."

He went on talking in this staccato manner for some time, but at last he stopped near Christopher and said:

"Now, I'm going to tell you something. You've ignored the family for years. You've gone on as if we were all nothing to do with you. You don't give a damn about family honour. Well, that's not good enough! The whole family is in a hell of a mess and it's up to you to get it out of it."

"Does it want to get out of it?"

"Oh, for God's sake, cut out that lunatic talk!"

Christopher laughed, then crossed to the desk near the window. He sat down, then repeated:

"Does it want to get out of it?"

Before Buck could reply, he went on:

"You want me to give you five hundred pounds. Well, I'm not going to. You've convinced me you don't want it."

"*I've* convinced you——"

"That you don't want it. You tell me this: What's the value of money—or of any other form of power?"

"It gets you out of a hole, of course!"

"You've had money all your life—and it hasn't kept you out of a hole. If you'd take the trouble to think about it, you'd discover that money—or any other form of power—enables one to multiply oneself. That's precisely what it does. It enables one to multiply oneself. To have power means you can get your own way—and so you can lead several lives. You can express yourself—multiply yourself. Well, I don't think your present kind of life is worth multiplying. *You've* convinced me that it isn't. If it is, why do you want to run away from it?"

"I know what all that means. I know that you've spied on all of us. You think I'm responsible for Helen, don't you? You think it isn't pretty that I've been a friend of her parents for years—and that I had an affair with her—and that I introduced her to Purvis and the Drewsons."

Then Buck shouted:

"I suppose you think I'm responsible for her death!"

"You're making me think so. If you don't think you're responsible, why don't you go to her parents?"

"I tell you that bloody little fool, Helen, would have got to suicide if I had never been born! It's nothing whatever to do with me!"

"Good! Then let's go and see her people—now."

After a silence, Christopher added:

"You're the one to go, as you've known them for years. But if you're not going, I am."

"*You* are going!"

"Yes."

"But they don't know you!"

"Do they know *you*?"

Christopher rose, but Buck seized his arm.

"Listen! You're not to tell them that you've seen me. Understand?"

"I'll know what to say when I'm with them—and not before."

Then Christopher went slowly out of the room.

For some moments Buck stared at the door with an expression of

extreme bewilderment, but eventually he rushed to the telephone, dialled a number, then waited—in a frenzy of impatience.

"Harold Teasdale's office? Now—listen! This is Buck Mannering. You tell Teasdale that I'm coming to him now, and that he's got to see me immediately. I don't care a damn whether he's engaged or not. Understand? I'm coming—now."

He flung down the receiver, then turned to me.

"You're coming with me."

"What on earth for?"

"You're coming! Don't argue! You've influence with him. He's damned well got to do something for me—and do it to-day. Come on! The taxi I came in is waiting."

Two minutes later, we were on our way to Teasdale's office.

II

Directly we reached Lincoln's Inn Fields, Buck hurried across the courtyard—almost ran up the stone stairs leading to the first floor—then flung open the door marked ENQUIRIES.

"Did you tell him I was coming? And that he'd got to see me immediately?"

Buck shot these questions at the willowy gentleman who had risen to attend to him, and who looked rather like a sixth carbon copy of the eminent Harold Teasdale.

"Certainly, sir. I will tell Mr. Teasdale you are here, and I have no doubt he will see you immediately."

"You'd better tell him that Mr. Drake is with me."

The willowy gentleman disappeared—and Buck vented his impatience by striding noisily up and down.

"Teasdale's all right," he announced angrily, "but I get so sick of all this morning-coat stuff—all this frowsty Victorian dignity. Even the damned furniture looks pompous! And that cursed clerk goes on as if he were God's butler. Still, he must have brains—or Foxy Teasdale wouldn't employ him. All the same——"

He broke off, because the willowy gentleman returned and said that Mr. Teasdale would be glad to see us.

Teasdale rose as we entered the private office, then greeted us with regal affability. I attempted to explain that there was no conceivable reason why I should have come with Buck, but my explanation was waved aside, with exquisite courtesy, and I was told at some length

how delighted Mr. Teasdale was to see me on any and every occasion. He then invited us to sit in the spacious armchairs facing the window. I accepted the invitation, but Buck preferred to remain standing.

"You would rather stand?" Teasdale inquired. "Just as you like, of course. Naturally, you are extremely disturbed by what has happened. You had known the young lady for a long time, and you had known her—intimately. Of course, you are disturbed. Especially as you are somewhat—shall we say?—indiscreet."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say, my dear Buck. You are far too communicative about your affairs—far too communicative. And—if I may say so—you have not a very good memory."

"Now, look here," Buck exploded, "I didn't come here for a chat about my character. What I want is——"

"To go abroad for a time. Yes, yes, I quite understand! I thought you would—directly I saw the morning paper."

This swift acceptance of his state of mind somewhat disconcerted Buck, who had evidently come armed with arguments to convince Teasdale of the necessity for flight. Consequently he was disconcerted. It is always disturbing to be forestalled—and it is often disturbing to be understood.

"So you guessed I'd want to clear out, did you?" he asked at last.

"I had no doubt about it. Directly I saw that the young lady had committed suicide——"

"Oh, cut that, for God's sake! There's nothing extraordinary about someone committing suicide nowadays, is there?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Plenty of people commit suicide, don't they?"

"Certainly," the lawyer replied. "There's nothing remarkable about it."

"Very well, then! Let's cut the chat. She's dead, and that's all there is to it. I've *got* to go abroad—for more reasons than you know. Many more! And I've got to pay some bills before I go. So it comes to this, Teasdale: I've got to have five hundred quid—and get it to-day."

Then, before Teasdale could speak, Buck raced on:

"I've tried to get it from Christopher, but he's a raving lunatic, so there's no help to be had from him. He wants the whole lot of us to go to hell. I haven't time to explain that, but you can take it from me that it's true."

Buck paused—went nearer to Teasdale—then said with heavy emphasis:

"Now, this is where you listen to me. Time and time again recently, I've asked you to realize some of my capital. And you've given me many excellent reasons why it was madness to do so."

"It is madness."

"I dare say it is! But I can do what I like with my own money. Anyway, I've not come here to argue—or to listen to arguments. You're my lawyer—and I *instruct* you to sell enough of my investments to raise five hundred pounds."

"I shall not carry out your instructions."

For a second, Buck was bewildered, then he blazed into furious anger:

"You'll bloody well do what I tell you, Teasdale! And you'll do it now! And—when you've done it—I'm moving my affairs to another lawyer. I've had enough of you and your damned pompous manner for a long time. You telephone a broker now and tell him to sell enough to raise five hundred. That's an *instruction*. An instruction from a client, and you'll obey it as if you were an office boy."

Teasdale rose, clasped his hands lightly behind his back, then faced Buck with mask-like impassivity. He might have been an iceberg contemplating a volcano.

"I am prepared," he said slowly, "to advance you one hundred pounds, so that you can run away from the very involved situation in which you find yourself—and of which you are terrified. I am never impressed by panic—and I always ignore instructions from those who are panic-stricken."

"I want no damned insolence from you, Teasdale! Now, which is it going to be? Are you going to telephone a broker—or am I going to another lawyer? Which is it going to be?"

"It's going to be neither. I have a copy of a letter in this drawer, and I think it my duty to send that letter to the coroner who will conduct the inquest on Helen. I will show you that letter. Then you can tell me whether you agree with me."

Teasdale unlocked a drawer—extracted a letter—and handed it to Buck.

Before Buck had read half of it, he sank into an armchair. When he had finished it, he looked like a man who had had a stroke. At last, with trembling fingers, he tore the letter into tiny fragments.

"As I said just now, my dear Buck, that is only a copy. The point is that I should value your opinion as to whether I should send the original to the coroner."

Teasdale paused, but, as Buck said nothing, he went on:

"Possibly this will be a lesson to you to be more discreet in future. You talk too much—and you have a bad memory. A man of your temperament should never write letters at all. You lack control, my dear fellow, you lack control."

"How the hell did you get hold of that letter?"

"There is no need to whisper. Nothing said in this room can be overheard. Surely it is of no importance how this letter came into my hands. The important fact is that—fortunately for you—it is in my possession. And, subject to your opinion, I do not propose to send it to the coroner. I feel that, to do so, would only cause the young lady's parents additional suffering."

Buck rose unsteadily.

"Give me that hundred, Teasdale. I can't stand any more of this. I've got to get out."

Teasdale pressed a bell-push—and in due course the willowy gentleman appeared.

"Be so good as to telephone Mr. Quiddle, the bank manager, and tell him that Mr. Buck Mannering will be drawing one hundred pounds this morning—from deposit account. Give Mr. Quiddle my compliments, and add that perhaps he will waive the usual notice of withdrawal as the matter is one of some urgency."

"The B deposit account?" inquired the willowy gentleman.

"The B deposit account," Teasdale replied frigidly. Then, having signed a cheque, he said to Buck:

"You are in a hurry. If you will go with my clerk, he will give you this cheque after the necessary formalities are completed. Do not worry about anything. There is no need."

Directly the door closed behind them I attempted to rise, but Teasdale stopped me.

"Do not go yet. I am glad you were here. Psychologically, the interview was not without interest. I doubt if it is generally recognized how often a lawyer has to protect clients from their own stupidity."

He glanced at his watch.

"I have a quarter of an hour before my next appointment, which, incidentally, is of some little importance. The Drewsons, Ethel, and Iris are coming here. They will all have to attend the inquest, of course, and it is necessary that their evidence should not conflict. Iris is the danger. She is very excitable. In fact, absurdly so. Still, I have my methods, and I am sure they will prove effective."

I was sure of it too, though I did not say so. Instead, I asked:

"You have no doubt what the coroner's verdict will be?"

"None whatever. Nevertheless, if this little matter were not properly handled, it might have serious consequences. It has placed a flame very near a heap of gunpowder. And it will certainly make Ernest Mannering less easy to control."

"There's one thing that seems very odd to me, Teasdale."

"And that is?"

"Helen has committed suicide. That is the supreme fact in the situation. And it is totally ignored by every one.

"I assure you it is the best thing that could have happened. She was a danger—and a grave one."

"You mean, she might have revealed the facts of the whole situation?"

"Precisely. She might have told those facts to Ernest Mannering. I was always a little afraid of that."

Then he added:

"But one has to take risks and, on some occasions, one has to take big ones."

Then he turned to me energetically and asked:

"Have you told Christopher the nature of the relations between the two Mannerings and their wives—and the relations of the latter with Buck, Purvis, and the Drewsons? Above all, have you told Christopher that Ernest intends to divorce Ethel?"

"I tried to, but it didn't come off."

"Didn't—come off?"

"No. Directly I started Christopher cut in and said he could see that someone had asked me to tell him something, but he was interested only in those things which I wanted to tell him. So that was the end of that."

Then I added:

"The whole point is that Christopher is sane—and that the Mannerings are mad. That is the whole point."

He looked at me narrowly for some moments, then said with marked deliberation:

"I can only repeat, Drake, what I said to you the other day. If you are aware of *all* the risks you are taking, you have courage of an exceptional order. I am quite certain, however, that you are *not* aware of the nature of all those risks."

After a pause, he went on:

"If you knew the effect of Christopher's influence on Belinda, you would agree with me. I have fears for her sanity. As to Godfrey Bristowe—who, as you know, once went to Beulah Island—I can

only say that I have recently heard rumours about him of the most disturbing kind. Has he written to you lately?"

"Not for months."

His telephone bell rang—and I left him.

CHAPTER VI

Another Letter from Godfrey Bristowe

The Same Thatched Cottage,
Suffolk. *March 1939.*

Joy—bliss—rapture!

I am going to Beulah Island!

And the faithful hound—Jaundice—is coming with me!

Mr. Bristowe has said farewell to the sane and, to-morrow, he goes to Beulah Island. Can you imagine what one of the damned must feel when the gates of hell slowly open—and an angel beckons? That is exactly what Mr. Bristowe is feeling now.

I stayed here all through the autumn and winter. I saw no one, wrote to no one, and did nothing. I had some quite marvellous moments, and some quite dreadful ones. Like most people, I have always dodged certain aspects of myself but, this time, I did not run away. I went into my private Chamber of Horrors and had a good look round. And Mr. Bristowe made the simple discovery that most of his vices—and all his poses and stupidities—were caused by the fact that he had been ashamed of what was most precious to him.

I have always hidden what was most dear to me—hidden it through fear of ridicule—and made a ghastly attempt to meet people on their own ground. I know now that this was only fear of loneliness. Well, for many months, I have accepted loneliness and—through accepting it—I think I have made a discovery about it. It's difficult to tell you what this discovery is, so I'll have to try in a roundabout way.

I always used to dodge the winter. I went to Egypt, to Spain, or the South of France. But, this year, I stayed here alone. I watched spendthrift autumn pass, first to penury, then to misty death. Winter confronted me. You can ignore all the other seasons, if you like, but naked winter is a challenge. It reveals the anatomy of things, not their ornament. And so it resembles loneliness. Loneliness is spiritual winter.

It follows that Mr. Bristowe has made all sorts of devastating discoveries during the hermit months he has spent here with the watchful Jaundice. A major one is that he has realized the implications of being an artist in a world like this. To be an artist means that you

do not belong, and that you cannot belong, anywhere. It will possibly sound odd to you, but, for me, Christ is the archetype of artist because he wanted to create a universal masterpiece—a masterpiece made flesh—a masterpiece of love. And that is why, I believe, that he prayed not " for the world." He did not care tuppence for the world of actuality. Only a transfigured universe had reality for him. Always he repudiated the claims made by the established order—claims made by those to whom the actual world was the real one.

(I've been reading the New Testament lately. I hadn't looked at it for thirty years.)

The simple fact is, of course, that the modern world is an asylum. Humanity is trying to turn itself into machinery. That is the simple —terrible—fact. Already we are beginning to *look* like machines. I passed a man the other day who was exactly like a precision lathe! Machinery is putting humanity on the scrap-heap. Of course there will be wars! War is the only activity which provides employment for the machines. Men are shovelled into the machines like coal into a furnace. That's the appalling fact. I tell you that, compared with the modern world, Dante's Inferno is just a country club.

(I've explained all this to Jaundice—who sits on his haunches, with ears cocked, his head to one side, looking extremely intelligent.)

Yes, all sorts of things have happened to Mr. Bristowe. One is that his worst vices no longer seem real to him. They are like fading tapestries hanging on the wall of Memory. It's all very odd, and rather frightening, but there's nothing I can do about it. Things are happening to me which I cannot stop or hasten. I can only watch and wonder.

Here's another discovery I have made. All my criticism of others was an attempt to evade my own inner emptiness. Also, to criticize others, numbs the feeling of guilt which every modern sensitive man experiences when confronted by the suffering of the world. You remember I told you about an old beggar who played a tin whistle in the Bostock Road. He represented martyred humanity, and I felt guilty whenever I passed him. I felt that I *was* him.

But do not imagine that I shall now cease to criticize others. Certainly not! It is a long-established habit, and the monster, Habit, is not easily driven from its entrenched positions. And even when it is driven out, it launches tremendous counter-attacks.

The next news is that Mr. Bristowe has lost his memory, which simply means that many of his past experiences now seem unimportant, so he has forgotten them. This loss of memory is happening to numbers of people, as you can see in the newspapers, and the amusing thing is that no one who has lost his memory wants to regain it.

Those doctors who imagine they have discovered an injection which will "restore memory" are baffled by the fact that they cannot find a single "lunatic" who wants his memory restored. Still, I quite understand that, for the "sane," these "lunatics" represent a serious problem, because these "lunatics" are serene, joyous, and loving—and what would happen to the established order if Serenity, Joy, and Love became contagious? Why, England would become Beulah Island! (Which, incidentally, is precisely what is going to happen—although the dregs of hell will rise to prevent it.)

And who are these people who lose their memories and who go to Beulah Island? They are those who desire a new way of life—desire it so much that they care about nothing else. They are those who know that the old way of life is madness, and know that it is doomed. They are those who refuse, whatever it involves, to surrender their humanity. It is man that matters, and, if man is menaced by machinery—and he is—then it is machinery that will have to be scrapped. Not man.

I know these Beulah Island people seem ridiculous. I know that Mr. Bristowe seems ridiculous. But ridiculous in relation to—*what*? The world of the sane? Well, I have been having a last look at the sane and I can only say, perfectly sincerely, that I am very glad I am a lunatic.

To begin with, take politics. It is March 1939. The Munich Settlement is six months old. The Appeasement Government is still in power. Its policy was blown to smithereens at Munich, but it is still in power. It is now, we are told, implementing a new policy which is not only diametrically opposed to its old one, but is the policy that it has consistently denounced. Everything has changed catastrophically, but the Appeasement Government is still there. Yes, it is still there—like Muddle on a monument, smiling at Mediocrity.

Look where you will, all you see is a façade with an abyss behind it. You *know* that what is presented as truth is a lie. I am going to give an absurd example, but it seems representative of a good many things to-day.

Take the inquest on that girl, Helen. If you read the newspaper reports, and if you knew nothing of the persons concerned in the case, you would be quite certain that Helen was just another hysterical modern girl who committed suicide on some sudden impulse. You would read the evidence of the Drewsons, and that of Ethel and Iris, and you would think they were decent people who were shocked and surprised by this girl's suicide. You would not wonder why Buck was not mentioned in the case, because you would not know that Buck existed. And you would be quite satisfied that the verdict

of Suicide during Temporary Insanity was the right and inevitable one.

Well, I do not know the facts, but I am certain that those are *not* the facts. I know the persons concerned—and those are NOT the facts. But my point is that many things to-day—social, political, and economic—are camouflaged just as effectively as the Helen case. On the surface they seem normal enough—but so does a gangster in a high hat.

Yes, Mr. Bristowe has been saying farewell to the sane. Perhaps the people I have visited are not representative of modern England, but I have an unpleasant feeling that they are very influential. They are middle-aged or old, and they are all tucked away in delightful houses, surrounded by spacious grounds. They are all ardent supporters of the Appeasement Government and care about nothing but maintaining their wealth and privileges. Like the Bourbons, they learn nothing and forget nothing. They are Victorian ghosts, because they have all the prejudices of the Victorians and none of their power. They are convinced that this is the age of Antichrist, as their interests are threatened; and they are certain that youth is decadent, although, of course, the most amazing fact about the youth of England is that it did not rise in wrath long ago and sweep aside the old men who totter and gibber in the seats of the mighty.

But what I found really alarming about these people in their delightful houses was that scarcely one of them had the remotest conception of the cyclonic forces that are rocking the modern world. There they all sat, chattering the old snobbish nonsense; trying to convince themselves that they were still in the centre of the stage; and even believing that, in some miraculous manner, the result of all this "unrest" would be to entrench them more securely than ever in their privileged positions.

This was especially the case with a parson I encountered in a fine old Elizabethan manor house. He was quite certain that Fear would soon send people flocking to the empty churches. He foresaw a "tremendous spiritual revival"—based on Fear. He evidently regarded the Almighty as a super air-raid shelter. Also, he genuinely seemed to believe that tyranny and torture had been invented by modern dictators. That really was rather too tiresome, so I pointed out that the dictators of to-day had invented nothing new in the technique of government, but had merely adapted the technique which the Church had employed when *it* had power. A Dictator has taken the place of the Pope. Instead of the Bible, you have *Mein Kampf*—or *Das Kapital*. Instead of metaphysical dogmas, you have political dogmas. Instead of the Inquisition, you have the

secret police. The young are forcibly fed with political doctrines, in exactly the same way as they used to be forcibly fed with metaphysical ones. And any one who rebels is tortured or killed—just as they used to be in the good old days.

These simple and very obvious remarks precipitated a dreadful scene. The parson became prune-coloured, but I did not argue because it soon became clear that he regarded the Church merely as the State in its Sunday best. Besides, he was frightened, and the arguments of frightened people are only Fear made articulate.

So Mr. Bristowe has said farewell to the sane, and is now off to Beulah Island with the excited Jaundice. Some people tell me that Beulah Island is a state of being—a spiritual consciousness—and that, once you gain this state or consciousness, you are in Beulah Island, no matter where you may happen to be physically. But all that is too subtle for Mr. Bristowe. I am off to Beulah Island—the actual place—with Jaundice straining at the leash.

Mr. Bristowe is now recognized as a lunatic and I cannot tell you what a relief that is! But, to be fair, I must admit that everything I think to-day would have seemed quite ridiculous to me a year or so ago. For instance, I used to think that men were the slaves of external circumstances, whereas, to-day, I believe that you can be free of everything which fetters you—if you desire freedom deeply enough. I believe that desire is prayer—the only form of prayer that is answered. (Which is one reason why it can be terrible for prayer to be answered.) So soon as enough of us desire a new world—desire it in the secret recesses of our own hearts—it will arise. And till enough of us do desire it, it will not arise—no matter how many high-sounding words we use, or how "idealistic" we proclaim our motives to be. It is *desire* that is made manifest. It is desire that brings you into hell—and desire that delivers you from it. There are exactly the same number of roads running into hell as there are leading out of it.

It was interesting to have a last look round at the world of the sane. You see things in perspective when you are leaving them, and, lately, my past life has been revealed very clearly. I realize now, that I ought not to have married. My type ought never to marry. I married only because I wanted desperately to prove to myself that I was normal. She was very lovely. Thank God she died. She would not have been happy.

I've turned over what little money I have to Beulah Island. I no longer care what happens to me. I don't mind if I spend the rest of my days digging—or washing plates—or doing carpentry. (I'm rather good at carpentry.) But I *must* be with people with whom I

am in real relationship—people who accept me as I am—people who desire a new way of life. People whose prayers are my prayers.

Talking about prayers, has it ever occurred to you how horrified a lot of well-meaning people would be if their prayers were suddenly answered? Think of all those people who repeat the Lord's Prayer automatically! Just imagine if that prayer were answered! "Thy kingdom come . . . Thy will be done . . . Deliver us from evil . . ." Imagine if those petitions were granted! There would be some wailing and gnashing of teeth. *But imagine if those petitions were the deepest desires of countless hearts.* Try to imagine that. And the result of that.

So in a few days Mr. Bristowe leaves the world in which he has made such a complete fool of himself and sets forth for Beulah Island with the jocund Jaundice. This little hound is the only being who has stuck to me. My debt to him is incalculable. Often and often I have wakened in the night—utterly wretched, totally alone—and if it had not been for the warm weight of this creature on my bed, I simply do not know what I should have done. During all the endless months in this cottage, what loving companionship this four-legged being has given me! Sometimes, when solitude became unbearable, I would suddenly remember that it was in my power to give ecstatic pleasure to this creature simply by putting on my hat and going out. I had only to move towards the door to find myself the centre of leaping joy. Often, as I walked through the lanes, I forgot solitude by identifying myself with the rapture of this absurd animal, who raced up banks, wriggled under five-barred gates, disappeared into woods—then returned with ears cocked, tongue palpitating, and eyes brimming with bliss. Sometimes I nearly wept, as I stood in a deserted English lane on a grey winter afternoon, watching the joy of a dog.

I know, of course, that the revolution which has happened in me was caused by Christopher. My real life dates from my meeting with him. I know, too, that his effect on every one is different, and that no two persons find him the same—and it is because of this that I want to tell you how I see him, then you can contrast that picture with the one you have.

I have always been susceptible to the physical aspect of people—much too susceptible!—but his beauty (and there is no other word for it) had a unique effect on me. There is something very odd about his appearance. You could list all his physical attributes, only to discover that each and all of them could be possessed by a man not in the least like Christopher. Someone said of Rembrandt's portraits that they reveal, not the brow, but the experience; not the eye, but

the expression; not the lips, but the sensuousness. It is true. But I would say of a Rembrandt portrait that it is the last chapter of a spiritual biography. A destination is revealed—revealed in such a way that you can infer every preceding stage of the journey. Christopher, too, creates this impression. You do not know what his actual experiences have been, but you do know the kind they *must* have been. And you know that his experience transcends that of any one you have ever met. I believe he has crossed all those frontiers which the rest of us dared not approach and, having crossed them, he encountered an experience as overwhelming as that encountered by Paul on the road to Damascus—an experience which transformed him so completely that you cannot be in his presence without being transformed yourself to some degree.

You know—or don't you?—that Belinda is at Beulah Island, and that Rupert has found a new victim. A lady of means—very "spiritual"—who is backing Rupert's movement for the regeneration of humanity. This lady is so taut and tense that she looks as if she has just been tortured, or is just going to be. At least, so I am told. Also, I hear that she is all eyes and teeth, like an alligator. But isn't it marvellous how Rupert finds these rich hysterical females who regard him as a spiritual superman? This particular one has put all her affairs into Teasdale's hands, and I believe Rupert has an arrangement with him.

Remember me to Sir Michael when you see him. And to Arthur Mannering when you write. I suppose he is still in America? I have not heard from him for a long time. And, whatever you do, give my love to Rosa.

Yours,
GODFREY.

CHAPTER VII

Drama at Meridian Square

A WINDY, wet March afternoon.

I returned to the Yellow Room just before three o'clock and found I had little to do. Christopher had been away for several days and, for once, the house was deserted. I could hear Rosa moving about downstairs, but, otherwise, there was not a sound.

I sat at my desk for some minutes, smoking a cigarette, half-wondering whether I would go to see Sir Michael, whom I had not met for some time. I knew that Linda was looking after the old man —as Mary had married and returned to Beulah Island—and I was anxious to know how the new arrangement was working.

I finished my cigarette without reaching a decision, and was about to go downstairs to speak to Rosa, when the door opened—and Iris Mannering appeared.

For some moments we stared at each other. She seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see her, but I only half-realized this at the time because I was concerned chiefly with the change in her appearance.

I had not seen Iris since the evening we had spent together at The Tabarin and, in view of Harold Teasdale's revelations, I was not surprised she had altered, but what did surprise me was the quality of the change in her.

At The Tabarin, although she had looked like a courtesan, she still had traces of immaturity. The startled blue eyes and the full indecisive mouth had suggested that she was not yet wholly at home in the world to which Buck and Purvis belonged. Not wholly at home in it, although she had paraded her attractions with such peacock satisfaction. But—now—there was no trace of immaturity. She had hardened and coarsened—and her figure possessed an almost prosional arrogance. Also, her eyes had a far-away expression, rather like those of a drug-addict, which suggested that her thoughts were concerned with something very different from her actual activities.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"Well, why not?"

"But I came to see—him."

"Christopher? He's away. He's been away for some days."

"Talk sense! He telephoned this morning, asking me to come here at three."

"Then he must have returned unexpectedly."

I offered her a chair, but she ignored it and began to walk round the room, pretending to look at things. She was wearing a close-fitting dark suit, absurdly high-heeled shoes, and there was something defiant—and something strangely submissive—in her attitude. Her presence created an atmosphere of taut expectancy. It was rather like being in a room with a time-bomb.

Suddenly she came over to me and said:

"It's not about Helen, is it?"

"About—*Helen*!"

"Yes! He doesn't want to talk about her, does he? He went to see her people after—after——"

She broke off, but I said nothing, and at last she went on:

"He's not met Purvis or the Drewsons, has he?"

"I don't know who he's met. You seem to think that I——"

I did not finish the sentence, because the door opened and—Ethel Mannering appeared.

She came to a standstill on seeing us, then stared from one to the other with an expression of utter bewilderment, till Iris said:

"Did he telephone *you* this morning—and ask *you* to come here at about three?"

"That's just what he did do," Ethel replied, "but I thought he knew I wanted to see him alone."

While they discussed the mystery of Christopher's telephone calls, I studied Ethel—whom I had not seen since the evening on which she had appeared so unexpectedly after I had dined alone with Ernest—and soon came to the conclusion that if Harold Teasdale had told me nothing about the many intricacies of her life, I should have guessed that plenty had happened to her since our meeting in the little Queen Anne house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

She was wearing a dark-green suit and, although her figure was as attractive as ever, she had none of her former vitality, consequently one noticed an inertia in her movements which contrasted dramatically with her animation at our last meeting. The confident note in her voice had gone and, one way and another, she had the nervous excitability of a person who is living in a permanent crisis.

As they both continued to ignore me I had ample opportunity to study them, and I gradually became aware of a subtle intimacy which linked them like invisible handcuffs. It was difficult to believe that a few months ago these women had been enemies, and I could only assume that this sudden intimacy had been created by the humiliations they had shared at the Drewsons' flat.

But another diversion was at hand.

The door was suddenly flung open—and Douglas Mannering strode into the room.

It was quite clear from his appearance that he had made elaborate preparations for this meeting with Christopher. He was tidily dressed and, presumably, had knocked off drink for a couple of days, because the angry expression of his eyes had been replaced by one of infinite boredom. It was quite evident that this was Douglas in a rôle far removed from his customary one, and it was equally evident that he had confidently expected to find Christopher alone.

Consequently he experienced such a shock on finding himself confronted by the three of us that it was some moments before he believed the evidence of his own eyes, though this lack of credulity may have been caused by that half-dazed state which claims habitual drinkers as a result of sudden abstinence.

"Quite a party," he muttered at last, then, without a glance at Iris, he lurched over to me and said almost in a whisper:

"What's the idea, old boy?"

"I haven't a guess," I replied.

"*You* haven't! Hell! All I know is Christopher telephoned The Red Star and left a message. That was two days ago—three days ago! I'm damned if I know when it was! He wanted me to come here at three to-day."

Then he added:

"Can't look her in the eyes, old boy. I've avoided her for weeks. I've been living with Kitty. You know Kitty—barmaid at The Red Star."

He shot a glance at Iris, then went on:

"Can't explain—it's too bloody long—but I'm afraid of hearing the truth about her. Understand? And I've done something that makes it certain I *will* hear the truth about her. Did it when I was drunk—damned drunk! Anyway, I'm not staying here. I'm clearing out—and I'm going now. You'd do me a favour if you'd strangle that bitch, Ethel—who can't keep her hands off Iris. You'd save more trouble than you'll ever guess if you did strangle her."

He gave his shouting laugh, then turned to go.

He had taken only a couple of paces, when the door opened again—and Ernest Mannering came into the room.

He stood just inside the doorway, scanning each of us in turn, till the silence became annihilating. He gave no hint of the surprise he must have felt at finding the four of us together—thereby convincing me that his hatred of Ethel had reached such intensity that it controlled all lesser emotions. Actually, I believe he exulted in

the embarrassment which his sudden appearance had created, and that he remained silent in order to intensify it.

At last—ignoring the women—he crossed to Douglas and began to talk almost in a whisper. Iris and Ethel started to chatter excitedly, so I was free to observe and to await developments.

At first I was aware only of the superficial aspects of this drama in which I had become so unexpectedly involved. I noticed, for instance, that one effect of Ernest's contemptuous manner was to make Ethel and Iris behave like a couple of street-walkers. There they stood in their high-heeled shoes, chattering and gesticulating, in a somewhat hysterical attempt to appear at their ease. I noticed, too, a strange subservience in Douglas's attitude as he listened to Ernest, who was explaining something with his usual finical precision, and it seemed grotesque that the powerful big-shouldered Douglas should be dominated by the foppish Ernest with his narrow head, mouse-coloured hair, and feminine figure.

But there were mysteries deeper than these.

Why had Christopher asked these people to come here? Why had each of them been certain that Christopher would be alone? Had Christopher some totally unexpected announcement to make? Did he know of the relations between these people? Did he realize the extent of Ernest's hatred for Ethel, and the plans Ernest had made to get rid of her? Did he realize the complexities of the Douglas-Iris situation? And, if so, what motive could he possibly have in bringing these people together?

But although these questions presented themselves, it was impossible to attempt to answer them. There were too many demands on my attention, for, although I had not a guess how the situation would end, I knew that a dramatic development was inevitable, and was on the alert therefore for the first signs of conflict.

When the tension had become so taut that I believe Iris would have screamed if it had lasted another second, the door opened—and Christopher came into the room.

Now, clearly, Christopher's appearance should have been an entirely expected event, and yet I am certain that every one was amazed by it. Nothing could be more indicative of the extraordinary atmosphere created by the presence of these four persons than the fact that every one of them seemed astonished by an event which was inevitable.

Christopher stood motionless, not looking at any one, and as I gazed at him I was almost overwhelmed by the total dissimilarity between him and the rest of us. The broad magnificent head, the fine fair hair, the blue eyes—the poise of the body—the texture of the

skin—distinguished him so absolutely from us that he seemed like a living man confronted by waxworks. At the risk of being ridiculous —and any one who writes about Christopher runs that risk—I can only say that whenever I found myself in his presence I seemed to enter a strange incalculable region which, nevertheless, was more real than the humdrum everyday world. To be with him was to encounter new thoughts—to experience different emotions—to gaze down vistas opening in obscurity. It was to feel the stir and throb of exultant life. His presence had the effect of music: it annihilated a world, and created a universe.

As I continued to gaze at him, I became convinced that he knew more about the four persons facing him than Harold Teasdale, or a hundred Harold Teasdales.

Meanwhile the others, having recovered to some extent from the surprise caused by Christopher's appearance, evidently recognized that a change of attitude was essential. The necessity for presenting a united front suddenly became apparent, for a regrouping took place. Douglas crossed to Iris—and Ethel went over to Ernest. Those whom God had joined were reunited, although it is doubtful if all went merry as a marriage bell as a result of this diplomatic reunion. It was interesting, however, that Christopher had compelled the two couples to assume the husband-and-wife rôle, if only to the extent of standing side by side. In view of the actual relations between them, this was a minor miracle, and the fact that Christopher had effected it merely by his presence made it nearly a major one.

"I wanted you to come here this afternoon," Christopher said at last, "because there are some questions I would like to ask you."

After a pause, he went on in the same extraordinarily clear tone:

"Of course you may decide not to answer those questions, but, if you do answer them, there are one or two things I would like to tell you."

He looked rapidly at each of us in turn. I have no idea what his glance conveyed to the others, but, directly his eyes met mine, I knew that he wanted me to remain in the room. This interested me, because I was about to suggest that I should go.

"The questions I want to ask are very obvious ones. There are only two, and the first is this: Why did each one of you want to see me alone?"

No one said anything, so Christopher added:

"Drake tells me that every one of you wanted to meet me—and that every one of you insisted on seeing me alone. Why?"

After a momentous pause, Ernest said:

"I suggested that we should meet alone out of consideration for you."

Christopher turned to Douglas.

"And why did you want to see me alone?"

"To tell you some things that would have been damned useful. That's why!"

Christopher glanced at Ethel.

"And you?"

"I wanted to warn you—but you evidently think you can look after yourself."

Before Christopher could ask Iris, she exclaimed excitedly:

"Everything you've heard about me is lies! D'you understand? Just lies! And everything you've heard about Helen is lies too!"

"What do you think I've heard about her?"

Iris went nearer to him.

"You know everything about her! You know everything about every one in this room! You——"

She broke off because Douglas swung round to her and shouted:

"I'll bet he doesn't know all about *you*! You'd get out of the room damned quick if you thought he did! You don't know what you're saying. You're hysterical—and you've been hysterical ever since Helen chucked herself out of that window. And I'll tell you who knows the truth about that. *You* do! And Buck, and Drewson, and that bastard Purvis! And there's someone else who knows. Ethel! Yes, *Ethel*—who you once hated like hell, and who now can't keep her hands off you!"

Ethel turned to Ernest.

"I suppose it amuses you to hear me insulted by this drunken brother of yours!"

"Insulted! You should be grateful to him for his reticence."

There was a breathless pause, during which frantic efforts were made to regain self-control. It was essential to collaborate—to present a façade of unity. Every one knew it—and every one was trying to remember it.

But the demands of the situation were too great for Douglas, who, having made elaborate preparations for a duologue with Christopher, now found himself cast for a part in a complicated drama. The switchover was too sudden for a man of his headlong temperament, who had already imposed a notable restraint on himself by not drinking for two consecutive days.

He turned to Iris and shouted:

"You think I know nothing about you, don't you? Well, you're

damned wrong! I know a hell of a lot about you—and I'll soon know *all* about you! And if I find out that you and Purvis——"

"You'll find out nothing!" Iris cut in. "All you care about is bars and barmaids. And I pay for both. And if you did find out anything, just what could you do? Divorce me? You! You'd be in the gutter now if it weren't for my money. If I died to-night, you'd be living with a street-woman to-morrow. That's the type you are!"

He went nearer to her, with a hand half-raised, but she made no attempt to protect herself.

"We're not alone—so you won't knock me about. You're good at telling people how you knock me about, aren't you? But do you tell them how you go on—afterwards?"

She turned to the others.

"He'll stand outside my door for hours and implore me to let him in. He cries like a baby—in front of the maids!"

"You're a lying bitch."

"He has to go with barmaids because I won't have anything to do with him. And he always picks a barmaid he thinks is like me! And this jealous lunatic imagines that I'm afraid of him! He'd kiss my shoe now—if I told him to."

She began to laugh, but Douglas seized her wrists and swung her round so that she faced him.

"Listen! D'you know what's going to happen to you? You're going to end up like Helen. Ah! That hit where it hurts! You may not be afraid of me, but, by God, you're frightened all right!"

Almost immediately he went on:

"And I'll tell you something else. Sooner or later, in this world, you run into someone tougher than you are. Teasdale told me that, and it's true. Well, that's what's happened to you. You're so scared that you're hysterical—just like Helen was. And so is Ethel. Scared stiff! Look at her!"

Ethel went nearer to Ernest.

"If you were a man at all, you'd stop this drunken lout. But you're not even the ghost of a man! You're impotent. You were born impotent! That's one reason why you hate women. Another reason is that you'd love to have been a woman. And you're more petty, more vain, more passive than any woman who was ever born! All you want is a nurse to look after you and your pansy friends. You'd stand there for ever listening to your wife being insulted, wouldn't you?"

"My dear lady, I assure you I am just as jealous of your honour as you are. In fact, I put precisely the same value on it as you do."

It was evident from the way in which Ethel stared at him that Ernest was not reacting in his usual manner to the humiliations she had heaped on him. She had expected him to writhe under the lash of her insults—especially as she had wielded it in public—consequently his contemptuous detachment disconcerted her, for it showed plainly that Ernest had found a new weapon and one far more powerful than any she possessed.

He moved a pace or two from her, then said more pedantically than ever:

"Why, exactly, do you find it insulting when my brother suggests that you know all the circumstances of Helen's death? You were intimate with the men connected with her—very intimate. Or am I wrong? The coroner evidently thought you knew something, as your presence was required at the inquest, although you were not at the Drewsons' when Helen threw herself out of the window. Incidentally, I cannot tell you how much I admired the way in which you gave your evidence. It was richly satisfying—wholly convincing. It had the authentic ring of well-rehearsed spontaneity."

After an effective pause, Ernest went on:

"As to my brother's suggestion that you are somewhat frightened, what is there insulting in that? It had occurred to me that you are not quite your usual confident self."

"You're *never* yourself! You haven't a self. You're a succession of poses. D'you think I'm deceived by this new one? You're trying to be independent. You're living at an hotel—and all the rest of it. I know you'll run back home directly your tea isn't hot, or directly they forget to put your hot-water bottle in your bed. *You'll* run home fast enough."

"My dear lady, I assure you that you are quite wrong. I am selling the house. In fact, I am now considering an offer I have had for it."

"You are—*selling*—the house?"

"Certainly. And its contents. I intend to get rid of everything that has been—contaminated."

Whether or not Ethel had been frightened before, she most certainly was now. She knew better than any one what the little Queen Anne house had meant to Ernest. All her power over him had been derived from that knowledge. He had married her only because she had restored the elegant, frictionless existence his feminine nature demanded, to which he had become accustomed during the years when his aunt had served him with such loving solicitude. Ethel had assumed, with some justification, that such an existence was essential to him—so essential that he would be the slave of any one who could ensure it. She had staked everything on the truth of

that assumption. She had been so certain of his dependence on her that she had become reckless. Consequently, the discovery that Ernest had decided to sell the house proved not only the sudden intensity of his hatred for her, but his determination to get rid of her. As she was wholly dependent on him financially, the situation was desperate. For the first time in her life, Ethel was terrified by the foppish, fastidious Ernest, whom she despised so deeply and had humiliated so mercilessly.

She began to insult him again, more grossly than ever. As Douglas and Iris were still engaged in a furious quarrel on their own account, the whole situation began to resemble a scene in Bedlam. The room echoed and re-echoed with accusation and counter-accusation, each more virulent than the last. This, probably, was inevitable, because the longer a row lasts the more frenzied it becomes, especially if the combatants have quarrelled repeatedly in the past. References to former frays became more and more frequent till, eventually, the insults they flung at each other were of such a character that only dementia could have uttered them. All the devils of hell seemed to invade the room. Christopher was forgotten. I was forgotten. Everything was forgotten—except the insensate desire to hurt and humiliate.

The row had just flamed to a new intensity—when I made the somewhat dramatic discovery that Christopher was no longer in the room.

An exclamation of surprise must have broken from me, for the others suddenly realized that Christopher had disappeared.

Silence descended. The kind of silence which makes you expect the Last Trump.

They stood, staring at the doorway—unable to think, unable to speak, unable to move.

Ernest was the first to recover. Without a word or a glance he hurried from the room, presumably in pursuit of Christopher.

Some minutes later, Iris and Ethel followed him.

And then Douglas began to laugh, and he went on laughing till he could scarcely stand.

"We've bitched our last chance, old boy. Bitched it to hell! Wait a minute! Want to tell you something. Want to tell you several things."

He held his head in his hands for some moments, then went on:

"D'you know who Christopher is? He's the devil. He's the devil himself. It's the devil who knows things. God is only a dreamer. Christopher *knew* he had only to get us here together for all hell to break loose. That's why he got us here. And I'll tell

you something else too. Christopher never asked his second question. And he knew damned well he wouldn't get the chance to ask it! And I got this bloody suit out of pawn specially for the occasion!"

He began to laugh again, then, with a lightning change of mood, he came nearer and said:

"D'you know what I'd like to do to her? Torture the truth out of her! Torture it out—damned slowly!"

Then, almost immediately:

"Christ, she's beautiful! I *would* kiss her shoe. She was right enough there. But I'm only crazy about her because she goes with other men. She'd bore me cold if she were faithful. I keep thinking of her with other men—and that just burns me up. But to hell with all that! Let's go and get drunk. You'll have to pay, old boy. Come on, for the love of God. I'll commit murder if I'm alone. We'll go to The Rat-Hole."

I hesitated for a moment, then said:

"All right. I'll come."

CHAPTER VIII

Intermezzo

I DO NOT KNOW how long I had been standing by the window of my room, looking down into the Square.

Sometimes you see the most familiar things under such a strange and such a magical aspect that you feel you are looking at them with the eyes of a poet. As I gazed at the plane trees, at the houses opposite, at the shadows and shapes in the Square, I felt I was a spy in paradise.

Just as midnight struck I went downstairs, then out into the cool, crisp air.

There are nights which caress the earth, but there are others—and this was one of them—which awe by their immensity. The over-arching heaven was infinitely remote, and a far-away moon seemed unfriendly as any star. Silence and space were one in cosmic partnership. Such nights belong to the universe, not to earth.

I began to walk slowly round the Square, but had not gone a hundred yards when I felt a hand on my arm and looked down to find that Rosa had joined me. We stood still for a moment, then walked on together.

Most conversations consist of a series of questions and answers, but this is often a sign that the participants are more or less strangers, for, where there is intimacy, "conversation" is a much more informal affair—a kind of thinking aloud. It certainly was on this occasion. So much so that it would have been almost incomprehensible to any one overhearing it.

Actually, however, I remember little enough of what we said, because, as we walked round and round the Square, I became more and more convinced that this meeting with Rosa had a significance wholly unrelated to our conversation. There was no external evidence, but I felt that this midnight walk together represented a climax in our relations—that something had come to an end, and that something wholly incalculable had begun.

It follows that I remember only fragments of what was said, but I do remember telling her that I understood the Mannerings, which showed I had something in common with them.

"*You* have something in common with them?"

"Quite a lot, Rosa. And, especially, with Douglas Mannering,

who is the headlong type, and who is going to the gutter just as quickly as he can. I like him—and I understand him. As I see it, Rosa, people go mad on sex, or crime, or war, when there is no outlet for their creative energy. And there is precious little outlet for creative energy in the Machine Age. The result is that energy manifests *negatively*. That's inevitable. If energy can't create, it destroys. Energy is like fire—it must do *something*. Fire either illuminates or annihilates. And energy either creates or destroys. But neither of them can do nothing."

Some minutes later she said, apropos of nothing:

"You don't imagine—do you?—that you've finished with Harold Teasdale. Because you haven't—not by a long way."

"He's the most interesting of them all. The whole world is crashing about our ears, but Teasdale is not disturbed. He's quite certain that the old order will survive—and that power will always be in the hands of people like himself. And the devil of it is that he may be right."

After a silence, she stopped and said:

"You've reached the point—haven't you?—when you wouldn't be surprised whatever happened. Even if you couldn't make it add up to anything?"

"I reached that point long ago."

"Certain?"

"Quite certain."

"That's all right, then."

We walked on, but I don't remember anything else we said—or whether we said anything—because I gradually ceased to be aware of my surroundings. And this was caused by the fact that, with ever-increasing frequency, I began to have glimpses of the city I had seen, as in a vision, when I had walked the moonlit streets with Christopher.

At last I saw it clearly—that city ringed with rolling hills. On the lower slopes, ascending rows of white terraced houses glowed in the sunlight; the green summits were dotted with sheep; and every now and then I saw the crystal flash of a falling stream. Again, I stood in those wide streets, lined with blossoming cherry trees, and from green-shuttered houses came the sound of singing and laughter.

Strange flowers flamed in countless gardens—the air was soft with a summer to be—feathery clouds flecked an azure sky.

Above the musical murmur of the life of the city rose the cries of children—playing in sunlit gardens, or exploring the green shade of the woods.

As I watched the beauty of the passing men and women—the serenity of their perfectly harmonized features—the rhythmic grace of their movements in lovely flowing robes—I knew that, one day; all men and women would be like these radiant beings who dwelt in this enchanted city, ringed with its rolling hills.

Then all vanished. I became aware again of Rosa's hand on my arm—of the dome-like silence—the vast void of night—and the cold beauty of the far-away moon.

CHAPTER IX

Two Conversations with Harold Teasdale

I

It was about three o'clock of a blustering March afternoon. I had been in the Yellow Room only a few minutes and had just begun to look through the letters on my desk, when the door of Christopher's room suddenly opened. Almost before I was aware of his presence, he passed me without a word and disappeared. A minute later, I heard the front door close behind him.

This happened so rapidly and was so unexpected—as Christopher had been away for some days—that I half-thought I had imagined it. I stood still, listening intently, although there was not a sound to be heard, till I noticed that Christopher had left his door ajar. Thinking that the room might contain some evidence of his future movements, I decided to go in and have a look round.

To my astonishment I discovered Mr. Harold Teasdale. Mr. Harold Teasdale, sitting motionless in an armchair, facing the light!

Now, it would be untrue to say that he looked disturbed, but there was a change in him, and a subtle one. The expression of the eyes was not on terms with that of the features. The eyes belonged to one man, and the features to another.

He regarded me with a stare, very different from his customary hawk-like glance, and when he spoke his voice lacked its virtuoso quality.

"I am relieved to see you, Drake. Something has just occurred which is unprecedented in my experience."

He looked up, frowned at the light, then adjusted the position of his chair.

"I came to this house to-day to make a definite proposal to Christopher. I have spent over an hour with him—and I have not made that proposal. That is without precedent in my experience."

He glanced round the room, as if in search of normality, but the off-white carpet, the black furniture, and the red lacquer desk evidently failed to remind him of reality. He turned to me abruptly and said with impressive emphasis:

"But I have made a discovery—and one which confirms my darkest suspicions."

"And that is?"

"I have discovered the extent of Christopher's madness—and the unique quality of that madness. And I tell you frankly, Drake, that I am appalled."

"What did Christopher say that appalled you?"

Teasdale rose, then paced slowly up and down the room. I do not believe that even a butler of the old school could have failed to be impressed by that eloquent figure as it paced majestically to and fro.

"It is nothing that Christopher said which appalled me. It is far more disturbing than that. The point is that it is necessary only to be with him for the most insane ideas to come into one's mind."

I tried to speak, but he checked me with a characteristic movement of his white hands.

"I assure you that while I was with Christopher I found myself questioning all the basic assumptions about life—assumptions which every intelligent man automatically accepts. I even found that I was questioning the validity of the foundations of civilized society."

"Well, what's wrong with that? If I were you, I'd go on questioning those assumptions, and the validity of those foundations. But we're not likely to get anywhere if we talk for a year, because I think Christopher is sane."

"Sane!"

"Yes—in the terms of a new kind of sanity. Not the old, which was a blend of blindness, cunning, and fear. Anyway, do you find much sanity in the modern world?"

Before he could reply, I went on:

"What's happened is that you and I and most people have become insane. But we don't notice it because it happened to all of us—and it happened very gradually. What you and I accept as normal and natural to-day would have seemed delirium five years ago. We're all living in terms of battle, murder, and sudden death—and we've all become accustomed to it. That is the fact. And, because it's a fact, the modern world is a madman's nightmare. That's obvious enough. And it's equally obvious that, if a madman's nightmare has become normal to us, we must be insane."

Teasdale returned to his chair—seated himself with judicial solemnity—then said oracularly:

"No one would deny that—temporarily—Hitler has created chaotic conditions in Europe."

"Hitler! And what was the condition of Europe before any one had heard of Hitler? I know it's fashionable here nowadays to make Hitler responsible for all the ills of Europe—especially by those who collaborated enthusiastically in the creation of Nazi Ger-

many. But it just won't do to pretend that Hitler is responsible for modern chaos. You might as well say that an echo caused an earthquake."

Teasdale assumed an expression which was a masterly blend of tolerance and patronage.

"Very well, Drake. Let us assume that no one individual is responsible for the present chaotic conditions which, I repeat, are merely temporary. Naturally, I admit that there are many grievous modern problems, but—will you kindly tell me—what solutions has Christopher for those problems?"

"He hasn't any. And neither has any one else. There aren't any solutions—on the level on which those problems are operative. I'll tell you how I see it. There are two thousand million people in the world. If every one of them remotely resembled Lao-Tzu, or Buddha, or Jesus Christ, there is not a single modern problem which would not vanish like a phantom of the mist."

"My *dear* Drake! Quite apart from the fact that it is extremely doubtful whether any of the gentlemen you have just mentioned ever actually existed—quite apart from that—if Christopher has a creed of some kind, he really must put it into words."

"There's plenty of written wisdom, Teasdale. And it's ignored, for all so-called practical purposes. Besides, written wisdom can be perverted, distorted, debased. Practically every horror can be sanctified in the name of Christ. If written wisdom could save the world, it would have been saved long ago. How many Christians *look* like the saved? If they didn't *tell* you they were saved, you'd never guess it."

"Whereas Christopher converts by his presence, is that it?"

"His presence has a very odd effect—as you discovered."

"This is serious, Drake. I half-suspected something of the kind."

"You'll find that you can't get a label for Chritsopher. I've tried—and I'm not too bad at finding labels for anything or any one who makes me uncomfortable. For instance, you can't say that he's a kind of super-freak who is remote from the actual world. It just won't do, because he's experienced infinitely more in this world than any of us. He's gone to the ends of all our roads, and he's come back. And he's a transformed being. And he looks like one."

"I can only repeat that this is serious, Drake. Very serious."

"So we're not likely to get anywhere by talking. You're convinced he's mad—and I'm certain he's sane. You think that modern chaos is temporary. Well, bar a miracle, I don't. I can't see any future for industrialized humanity. We are surrendering to the machine and, when that surrender is total, we shall have ceased to

be human. We shall have ceased to feel. Feeling is life. I know it's the modern ideal to be tough; that is, not to feel anything. But it's as well to remember that nothing is tougher than a corpse—because it just doesn't feel a thing."

"This really is serious, my dear Drake. I do not think you realize how serious."

"Maybe not. It's also serious that we're on the threshold of a series of wars and revolutions. Already, every nation will do anything to get trade, on any terms, with any one. Any nation will supply another with arms although, at the same time, it denounces that nation's military policy with a deluge of nauseating cant about ideals. Markets, Teasdale, *markets*—markets for the products of the machine! That's all that matters nowadays. The chatter about ideals doesn't mean a thing. It's a type of camouflage."

Again, Teasdale rose and wandered about the room, stopping first at one window to gaze down into the Square, then at the other in order to glance at the garden. It was evident that he had not entirely recovered from the effect of his interview with Christopher, but it was also clear that he was *en route* for recovery.

"The trouble about you, Drake," he announced at last, in the tone of one giving a considered opinion on a complicated and highly unpleasant subject, "is that you are an idealist. And, to be frank, most modern problems are caused by well-meaning romantic idealists. Not only do you think that Christopher is sane, but you evidently believe that he, and the extraordinary people he sees fit to mix with, are a kind of brotherhood. A brotherhood which, I gather, is going to spread to all humanity."

I burst out laughing.

"You refer to brotherhood, Teasdale, as if it were the plague. Actually, of course, brotherhood is a fact."

"You won't find it easy to convince me of that."

"Well, that's odd, because it seems to me that everything proves it nowadays. The raiding airplane is one sign of brotherhood. The very fact that men can fly hundreds of miles to blow you to bits is a notable reminder that we are all members one with another. No nation is isolated to-day. You just can't be indifferent to what men and women of other nations are thinking and feeling. What they think and feel affects you—vitally. There are plenty of things which all men and women share in common to-day. Here's some of them. No one is safe. No one is certain about anything. All are afraid. Brotherhood is the recognition of things shared in common. There *is* brotherhood in the modern world, Teasdale. It's the brotherhood of hell—but it's brotherhood none the less. And perhaps it's better

to be forced to recognize brotherhood on any level—than to deny it on every level. If we won't have the brotherhood of heaven, we get the brotherhood of hell. But one or the other we must have—because brotherhood is a fact."

Teasdale returned to his chair, then seated himself with such solemnity that I half-expected him to assume the Black Cap and pronounce sentence of death. Actually, however, he leaned towards me and said in the cajoling tone one uses to a slow-witted child:

"Now, Drake. I want you to try to remember something. Will you do that?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I want you to remember something I said to you not so long ago. Now, let's take our time. There's no hurry. I said to you, in my office, that you had courage. And I added that, if you were aware of *all* the risks you were taking, you had courage of an exceptional order. Do you remember my saying that?"

"Perfectly," I replied briskly. "And you meant that I was risking my own sanity by associating with Christopher."

He made a gesture which implied that he would never have expressed himself so crudely.

"That is what you meant," I insisted. "And I assure you that I have long been aware of that sinister possibility. Naturally, I know that many of those who look after mad people eventually go mad themselves. But that sinister possibility no longer frightens me. I am much more afraid of the sanity of the sane than I am of the madness of Christopher. Nevertheless, it is only fair to tell you that one side of me would give a lot to be convinced that Christopher is mad."

"I'm delighted to hear it. You reassure me. Have no doubt about it, Drake, Christopher is a lunatic—and a more dangerous one than many who have outward signs of insanity. It is grotesque that he was certified sane. And it is scandalous that the control of his vast fortune is in his own hands."

"I'd like to believe he is mad, Teasdale, because I want to evade his challenge. For he *is* a challenge—as you discovered when you were with him. He is a whole man—and we are caricatures of men. He's recovered faculties which we lost long ago. We've destroyed our intuitions—but he lives intuitively. We grope—and he sees. Our emotions war with our reason. His are in harmony."

"My dear fellow, I really cannot agree with one word of that."

It was quite clear that Teasdale was rapidly returning to his normal self. Also, I had the odd feeling that he continued the conversation

only because he hoped it would lead to one of an entirely different kind.

"No, really, with the best will in the world, I cannot agree with one word of that. In what way, for instance, are most men caricatures?"

I burst out laughing.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it? Who was it said that a modern man is either just an Ear, or an Eye, or a Priapus, or a Brain? Well, it's true enough. We're not men. We're one aspect of Man. One aspect—monstrously distorted. And it's because we're aware, underneath, of this monstrous distortion, that we are disturbed when we find ourselves in the presence of someone who is not deformed. And, because we are disturbed, we say he is mad."

Once again, Teasdale rose and began to pace slowly up and down. He had nearly recovered his usual self-assurance. There was no longer any conflict between the expression of the features and that of the eyes. He moved with his customary distinction and, when he spoke, his voice had regained its orchestral quality. It was clear that, very soon, I should be confronted by the Harold Teasdale of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"The world is the world, my dear Drake," he said at last, "and facts are facts. I admit that Christopher has a disturbing influence. Unfortunately, you have been subjected to it so long that certain facts may have become obscured. May I remind you of them?"

On my saying that he might, he stopped opposite me, then began to enumerate the facts with forensic precision. Whenever he mentioned one of major importance, a finger shot upright to emphasize its significance.

"Very few people are mysterious if you trace their development backwards. Everything bears the mark of its origin. And this is especially true in the case of Christopher."

After a pontifical pause, he went on:

"The child of Viola Teasdale and Alastair Bell was likely to be exceptional. Remember the circumstances of their marriage, and, above all, remember how Viola's infatuation for Alastair Bell made her forget every obligation and every responsibility."

"I remember her beauty—and his genius. That's all I remember about them."

"She forgot every obligation and every responsibility," he repeated. "She deserted her children—and the effect of that desertion is written on every one of them. She broke every link with tradition—and the result of that madness is apparent in the Mannering and Teasdale families to this day."

Almost immediately, he added emphatically:

"Christopher was born abroad. He travelled far and wide in the East. No one knows the extent of those journeys. As you know, on the death of his parents, Christopher was educated by a number of unknown tutors. Alastair Bell's will contained instructions about Christopher's education, and those instructions were carried out. Mistakenly, in my judgment. Now, Drake, you may know these facts, but I emphasize them—because their importance cannot be exaggerated."

There was a long silence, then I said:

"You evidently attach great importance to the fact that Christopher has travelled extensively in the East."

"I do attach considerable importance to it. He may have acquired certain occult knowledge in the East and is now exploiting it for his own ends."

"I'm surprised you admit there is such a thing as occult knowledge."

"My dear fellow," he said patronizingly, "there are certain facts for which I have failed to find a rational explanation—so I am prepared to admit that they may have an irrational one. Why not? In default of knowledge, one uses an hypothesis."

"What are the facts for which you can't find a rational explanation?"

"One is Christopher's effect upon others. While I was with him, the most grotesque ideas invaded my mind. And there are other examples of the strange effect he has upon people. Recently, Ernest and Ethel—and Iris and Douglas—met Christopher in this house. You were present, and you know that they had every reason not to reveal their actual relations in front of Christopher. What did they do? They quarrelled violently, thereby imperilling their own interests. Unfortunately, there are other examples. Belinda is wholly under Christopher's influence. So is Godfrey Bristowe. And I am far from certain that Sir Michael is not, to a lesser extent, in the same predicament."

He made a little movement with his slender hands, then continued:

"Those are facts, and they force me to admit, as a possibility, that Christopher has almost hypnotic power over people. As regards yourself, I have felt for some time that you were risking your sanity by remaining in this house. Now, I am certain of it. You must forgive my frankness. *You are risking your sanity.* And so are those deluded people, drawn from every class, who frequent this

house as if it were a club. And it disturbs me very much that Sir Michael is one of them."

"Well, there's not much use discussing it, Teasdale, because, if I were to tell you what I think about those people, you would be convinced that I am a bigger lunatic than Christopher."

"And what do you think about them?" he asked, in a manner which implied tolerance but, actually, was condescending.

"I think they are determined to find a new way of life—and are prepared to make any sacrifice to bring it into being."

"Really, my dear Drake, *really*! You do not seriously suggest that persons like Belinda and Godfrey Bristowe are heralds of a new race!"

"They are capable of change. And we are all going to change—or perish. We are going to become regenerate—or disappear into the abyss. Surely that's clear! Either we're going to become persons with different desires, different thoughts, different emotions—or we are all going to become members of a vast suicide club. That's how I see it, but let us assume you are right—let us assume that these people are mad. Well, what have the sane to offer?"

"Organization, Drake. That is all that the present system needs. Organization—and the suppression of fanatics."

"It's going to be a job to reorganize the capitalistic system. What has it offered these last ten years but ever-increasing doles? In other words, the capitalistic system has to pay such big premiums against revolution that it is committing suicide, on the instalment system, in the hope of dodging sudden death."

He said nothing, so I went on:

"We've reached the end of an era—and the people you despise so much are the ones who know it. Of course they seem ridiculous! Every one who believes in regeneration seems supremely ridiculous."

"But, my dear fellow, you don't seriously believe that the world is going to change—fundamentally?"

"There will be a new world directly enough people want a new world. Somebody once said that there are doors which will not open till millions stand before them. When enough people want a new world, it will arise. And not before. Ideals won't bring it—and neither will schemes for a utilitarian Utopia. Neither prayers will bring it, nor planning. It's what we all really want most that counts. What we really want when we're alone. Not the ideals we profess—that's just moral exhibitionism."

Teasdale dismissed the whole subject with a graceful movement of his hands. It was clear that he had practically recovered from the bewilderment caused by his conversation with Christopher. He was

his statuesque self again. This was the Harold Teasdale I had met for the first time at the family council. Everything about him suggested isolation from the vulgarities of a plebeian world. The prominent chin and cheek-bones, the bold nose, the air of distinction which invested him, all created an impression of aloofness from minor mundane matters. Yes, this was the authentic Harold Teasdale, the survivor of high tradition—the connoisseur of values, in an age that had none.

"The world is the world, my dear Drake, and I assure you it does not change fundamentally. It is true, unfortunately, that the mob is sometimes swept with enthusiasm for some ridiculous ideal. You may possibly remember the League of Nations. That is an example. And nowadays there is a good deal of silly chatter about a new Europe."

He made a movement which suggested that he was rejecting something wholly repellent, then he continued:

"The whole art of government is to pretend to represent the ignorant enthusiasm of the mob and, at the same time, to implement a policy utterly remote from it. For instance, no member of the present government has the least faith in democracy—naturally—but it is expedient to pretend a burning ardour for democratic principles. To-morrow, it may be necessary to pretend to possess fervent belief in communism, or a new Europe, or some nonsense or other. But, fundamentally, things do not change. A government should make only such concessions to the mob as are necessary to avoid revolution. Statesmanship, as regards internal policy, is the art of judging when it is essential to throw a bone to the dog."

"The bone is getting smaller, Teasdale. And the dog is getting bigger."

Then I added:

"It's queer, but I've known for months that we should have this conversation. The fact that I've argued with you shows that something in me half-believes in you. One argues, of course, only to convince oneself. But the point is that I feel there is something else you want to discuss."

"There certainly is, Drake. Matters of major importance."

He looked round the room disparagingly, then added:

"Would it be too much to ask you to come to my office? I cannot tell you how intensely I dislike this room."

"Very well. We will go to your office."

A few minutes later we were in a taxi on our way to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

II

It was very evident that Teasdale derived deep satisfaction from finding himself in the familiar setting of his private office. His nostrils dilated with pleasure as he glanced round the room which was associated with so many triumphs, and had witnessed so many critical interviews. The prints on the wall, the period table near the window, proffered a mute welcome. The tensity of the atmosphere invigorated him: the silence had a unique reassuring quality. Directly he found himself in his private office, the meeting with Christopher dwindled to the memory of a disturbing dream. Normality returned. Harold Teasdale was wholly himself again.

He motioned me courteously into one of the gaping armchairs, then seated himself at the table.

"There are no secrets between us, Drake, and I can therefore speak with absolute frankness."

He turned quickly to me and I encountered the full glance of his extraordinary eyes. Whenever this happened, I felt I was gazing into an abyss, but, on this occasion, I also felt that in some incalculable way this man was as remarkable as Christopher.

For several moments I could think of nothing to say and was somewhat relieved when he added:

"The situation which I outlined to you at our recent meeting in this room is rapidly passing beyond my control. It was with a view to averting impending catastrophe that I went to see Christopher to-day. if that catastrophe is not averted, there will be a series of scandals in the Mannering and Teasdale families which will ruin both of them. That, briefly, is the position."

He then summarized the changes that had happened since our discussion in his private office, but although he revealed the new complications with all his customary ability I was vaguely aware of an urgency, behind the seemingly detached statements, which I had not noticed on the former occasion. But he certainly did make me realize that the situation had reached explosive intensity.

"We shall have to discuss details, Drake, but—I beg of you—remember that lack of money is responsible for the scandal which threatens. It is essential to remember that."

He broke off, drummed the table lightly with the fingers of his left hand, then turned to me and said incisively:

"The pivotal person is Ernest Mannering—so we will start with him. You know he is selling that Queen Anne house, which is a part of himself—and you also know that he can no longer conceal

his hatred for Ethel. He is determined to divorce her, and to marry a woman with money. Incidentally, for a man of his type, in his present circumstances, he has no alternative but to marry money. All this you know. But you do not know that he is on the point of changing his lawyer."

A dramatic pause.

"Now, Drake, I want you to follow me closely. It is one thing for a ridiculous person like Buck to threaten to remove his affairs from this office, but it is quite another when Ernest Mannering decides to do so. Do not—I beg of you—minimize Ernest's mental capabilities. It would be a cardinal error. Do not allow his many mannerisms to blind you to the fact that he has a good brain, and a subtle one."

I tried to speak, but he stopped me.

"It is better simply to listen for the time being. It is necessary to emphasise that Ernest Mannering is not a fool. His outlook on women proves that. Nevertheless, it used to be easy to control him, especially as I believe he had a certain respect for my opinion. It is easy no longer. Ernest is convinced that the evidence necessary to divorce Ethel exists—so convinced, that he insists on action. I believe that he suspects that I am already in possession of the requisite information, but it is certain that he is about to go to another lawyer. If he removes his affairs from this office, the results will be—incalculable."

He shot the last word at me with telling emphasis.

"What about Ethel?" I asked at last.

He gave a short laugh.

"I have a theory that sooner or later one encounters a more ruthless example of the type to which one belongs. And that is precisely what has happened to the dominating Ethel. So much so that it frequently amuses me to analyse the dilemma of the once redoubtable Ethel."

Before I could say anything, he went on:

"Let me say this: do not be deceived by her poses—and absurd intellectual pretensions. Ethel is clever enough in her way."

"She wasn't clever enough not to get divorced by her first husband—and divorced in very unsavoury circumstances, according to you."

"Perfectly true, Drake, but her deception was discovered by a fluke which she could not have foreseen. However, she soon had an elderly widower in her toils and gave him up for the richer prize of Ernest Mannering. And, I assure you, if it had not been for money difficulties she would have deceived Ernest indefinitely. Or he would

have remained indifferent to her infidelities—which is the more accurate statement."

"Well, I still don't think she is clever. She made one fundamental mistake. She imagined that if she ran the Queen Anne house efficiently, Ernest would not worry about anything else. She was wrong. And she made another fundamental mistake by humiliating him so frequently. Every one knows that the Ernest type is capable of hatred which is all the more deadly because it's the underground kind."

"Money difficulties account for all that, Drake. Ethel has an admirable figure and spends a lot on clothes. The house costs a good deal to run—by Ernest's standards. Quarrels began with shrinkage of income—especially as Ethel's extravagance on clothes became much greater after she met Purvis."

Again he gave a short laugh, then went on:

"In Purvis she encountered a more ruthless example of the type to which she belongs. If she had broken with him on the first sign of danger from Ernest, she might have retrieved the situation. But she could not break with him. She is, literally, his slave—and that fact will ruin her. If she is divorced, Purvis will not marry her. Ethel will find herself alone and penniless. She knows it—and she is very frightened. In fact, she is somewhat hysterical—rather like that girl Helen who committed suicide."

Teasdale rose, then stood with hands lightly clasped behind his back, looking down at Lincoln's Inn Fields. For some reason I felt he had spoken at greater length about Ethel than he had intended, and that he had done so because he derived secret amusement from the peculiar nature of her predicament.

"It is necessary to discuss, briefly, other people concerned in the general situation, but, before we leave Ernest and Ethel, remember that the supreme fact in the situation is that Ernest is on the point of transferring his affairs to another lawyer. It is essential—absolutely essential—that this should not happen."

He proceeded to outline the position regarding Douglas and Iris in the same incisive tone, which was such a marked contrast to his usual one.

According to Teasdale, Douglas was becoming utterly unrestrained. He was never entirely sober—he disappeared for days together—and made no attempt to hide his numerous affairs with barmaids. So far as Douglas could be said to possess a policy of any kind, it was the negative one of avoiding Ernest.

Teasdale ended by saying:

"So much for Douglas. He will go to the gutter, and it will not

be long before he arrives there. We need not waste words on him, but the situation regarding Iris is more complicated."

He was silent for a moment, then said:

"It is so complicated that I will give you only the main facts. But—again—remember that lack of money is the governing one."

After a calculated pause, he went on:

"Iris has instructed me to take divorce proceedings against Douglas. Her motives are obvious. She has to keep him and, if she were free, she imagines she could marry someone with money. Possibly she could. She has her attractions—and the world is full of fools. The point is that she has instructed me to obtain the evidence necessary for her to divorce Douglas—which she knows is easily obtainable."

"And that's awkward for you," I said, "as you are already acting for Douglas—and you possess all the evidence necessary for *him* to divorce *her*."

"Precisely. The whole situation is very nearly outside my control and will be completely outside it—if Ernest removes his affairs from this office."

He turned from the window, then gazed intently at the carpet.

"What about Buck?" I asked at last, as he remained silent. "Is he still abroad? I've heard nothing from him since he went away."

"Buck has lost his nerve—and he is very short of money. He is in Paris and he dare not return to London. Apparently, the parents of that girl, Helen, write to him continually. I gather there are a number of things they do not understand about her suicide. One is that Buck never told them that their daughter was intimate with the Drewsons and Purvis, although they were friends of his. Also, they cannot imagine why Buck has not been to see them—and they keep pressing him to do so. They are suspicious of all the circumstances surrounding their daughter's death—and of Buck's relation to those circumstances. In addition to all this, it is possible that Buck is being blackmailed by the Drewsons. Which may be one reason why he writes to me every other day saying that he must have money."

Teasdale sat down, then turned to me and said emphatically:

"Now, I want you to realize this. We are forced to discuss Ernest and Douglas and Buck because, between them, they may cause a scandal which will involve the whole of the Mannering and Teasdale families. But, unfortunately, the financial affairs of *all* the Manner-ings and Teasdales are in a precarious position. I am harassed on every side by people clamouring for money—and I can no longer restrain them."

"I understand that all right. It's the end of the Mannering-

Teasdale world. The private income world is on its deathbed. Before long, the only asset worth having will be a job."

But Teasdale waved that prophecy aside with a rhythmic movement of his hand

"Even Sir Michael is becoming more eccentric. He has taken a factory girl called Linda into his house—and the Mannerings are afraid he will marry her."

"Sir Michael's all right," I said, as I rose to go. "He has vitality and he is positive—which are rare virtues to-day. As to the others, it was obvious that all of them were heading for a crash. You won't be able to stop that crash. No one could. But what annoys me is that Rupert will survive it."

"What makes you think that?"

The question surprised me and I must have indicated this, for he added:

"You mean he is no longer dependent on the family—and has given up his hopes in Christopher—since he interested that lady in his affairs? That's perfectly true. Financially, he is independent."

"Although, fortunately for the lady, her affairs are in your hands."

I was about to say good-bye, but he motioned me into the armchair I had just vacated.

"One moment. There is a matter of the greatest importance which I must mention before you go."

After an impressive pause, he continued:

"I went to see Christopher to-day to make a suggestion to him, and one which showed plainly that no interests of my own were involved. I want to stress that no interests of my own are involved. I intended to propose to him that he should place the administration of his affairs in my hands—without remuneration to myself."

"What good would that do?"

"It would enable me to restrain Ernest by reviving his hopes in Christopher. But, above all, I am convinced—absolutely convinced—that if I were in constant contact with Christopher, in a professional capacity, I should be able to make him realize the paramount necessity for preventing a scandal which will ruin the Mannering and Teasdale families."

"And, in spite of those advantages, you did not make that suggestion?"

"I have already told you so!" he exclaimed irritably. "But I want you to make it."

I was too surprised to say anything immediately. It seemed to me that, for the first time, Teasdale was being unintelligent. He knew perfectly well that, on a former occasion, he had attempted to use

me as an ambassador to Christopher—and the result had been total failure.

"But surely you remember," I said at last, "that when I tried some time ago to tell Christopher something on your behalf, he cut in and said he could see someone had asked me to tell him something—but he wished to hear from me only what I wanted to tell him. Why on earth do you think I should have any greater success if I tried again?"

"It is imperative that this suggestion is made to him—imperative in his own interests, and in those of others."

"Then you will have to make it, Teasdale. It would be quite useless for me to do so."

A few minutes later I left him.

On this occasion he did not come down to the courtyard with me but, on my way out, I ran into the willowy gentleman who was evidently going home.

We descended the stairs together and he informed me, in a voice which seemed a distorted echo of Teasdale's, that he always went abroad for his holidays—and he hoped that the international situation would not prevent him doing so this year.

We walked across the courtyard, but parted when we reached the iron gate.

For some moments I studied his retreating figure—noting the morning-coat; the neatly rolled umbrella; the simulated air of distinction—till I felt that I was watching a caricature of Harold Teasdale disappearing into the deepening dusk.

CHAPTER X

Exit

A DAY in early April—a day of shy fugitive sunlight. . . .

I had lunched with Sir Michael at his club in Piccadilly and, as I walked home, I was too intent reviewing our conversation to be wholly aware of my surroundings but—when I turned into Meridian Square—I instantly came to a standstill.

Till now, I had never entered the Square without experiencing a sense of sudden liberation. No matter what my mood had happened to be, some spell in the atmosphere had transformed it. I had long given up trying to discover the nature of this spell, and had gradually become accustomed to the strange fact that I had only to enter Meridian Square to find myself suddenly surrounded by serenity.

But—now—everything had changed. A sad-looking Square confronted me—one of those many London Squares which seem to know that their bright day is done, and they are for the dark. The houses had a wan aspect: the trees a lugubrious air. An errand boy was kicking an empty can along the gutter, while he whistled certain shrill variations on the tune of a popular song.

I stood still, trying to decide whether I was seeing the Square as it had always been in actuality, or whether I was about to be ill and therefore saw everything in distorted perspective. I glanced at Christopher's house with its seven shallow stone steps, but its attraction had gone. I looked at the window of my room, remembering how often I had stood there gazing at a Square mysterious in misty moonlight; or a Square fresh as Eden in the early slanting sunlight.

Feeling strangely perturbed, I hurried to the house—let myself in—then stood in the hall, listening.

"Rosa!"

The sound of my voice explored the house, then died away.

I raced up the stairs—and almost ran into Christopher's room.

It was empty.

I hurried to the floor above.

Rosa's room was empty.

I went slowly down to the Yellow Room, then looked for a note.

There was nothing.

They had gone, and I knew with absolute certainty that they would never return.

I do not know how long I stood by my desk, listening to an unfamiliar silence, but eventually I telephoned Harold Teasdale and told him that Christopher had vanished. And that I was certain he would never return to Meridian Square.

Part III

BLACK-OUT

CHAPTER I

The Disappearance of Christopher

CHRISTOPHER's dramatic disappearance created a sensation which was not limited to the Mannering and Teasdale families. It instantly became front-page news, and it stayed front-page news for some days.

That was inevitable, of course. An eccentric multi-millionaire could not vanish, as effectively as if he had evaporated, without causing frenzied excitement in a money-mad world. He might have been kidnapped. He might have been taken for a ride. He might be wandering about, incognito, looking for those worthy of boundless benevolence. Christopher's disappearance proved that Life was catching up with the Movies. Nature was copying Art—Hollywood was vindicated. Millions of movie-imaginations began to dream dreams and see visions.

But the Christopher sensation had a double thrill because, recently, he had become intimately associated in the public mind with the ever-increasing number of people who had "lost their memories" and were behaving in a manner strangely at variance with their normal one. In fact, it had been hinted that Christopher was the centre of a new creed, the adherents to which had no declared doctrine but became transformed in a way reminiscent of the worst excesses of the early Christians. It was even whispered that these "lunatics" were not only serene and joyous, but that their serenity and joy were contagious. This malicious rumour caused such panic among the more fervent supporters of the established order that they hastened to be inoculated against this new and dread disease. But this was nothing compared with the reaction of the many religious persons who were determined to make the world Safe for Suffering. Their hatred glowed with Inquisition intensity at the blasphemous idea that humanity might become joyous and serene. Antichrist was at hand! Denunciatory sermons thundered through empty churches.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Christopher's disappearance was front-page news. It follows that for several days my time was occupied wholly with journalists.

Many of them I had met before, but there were newcomers—representing certain Sunday newspapers—who were clamorous in their demands that I should sign a series of articles on "Christopher—Messiah or Madman?" Or, preferably, that I should sign a single

snappy article on "Christopher—and the Secret Blonde." This article was to begin by hinting that Christopher had a hidden mistress who was a new high in sex-appeal, then give a scarifying account of his Hypnotic Power over Women. The fact that I refused these offers did not prevent the appearance of the articles, which were duly published, with a note to the effect that they were based on information supplied by one in unique relations with the Demented Millionaire.

Most of the journalists I already knew because Christopher had given interviews to many of them at their urgent request, and with most unexpected results. Every one of them, on finding himself alone with Christopher, had forgotten his carefully studied questions, and had begun to talk about his own affairs and problems with a spontaneity which had amazed and appalled him in retrospect. One of them, representing an American paper, said to me soon after meeting Christopher: "That guy's got something. He may not know all the answers, but that does not mean a thing, because he makes you forget all the questions."

Naturally, it was difficult to convince these fellows that Christopher's disappearance was utterly unexpected by me and that I had no idea where he was or the nature of his plans. Fortunately, however, it soon became known that Christopher had not returned to Beulah Island, consequently the popular papers diverted their energies to a detective hunt for the Mad Millionaire.

Directly I was free of the journalists, I had to deal with the Mannerings and Teasdales.

Harold Teasdale's reaction to the news was the most enigmatic. Knowing his desire that the administration of Christopher's affairs should be placed in his hands, without remuneration to himself, I naturally thought he would regard Christopher's disappearance as a disaster. Consequently I was very surprised by his detachment.

"I do not altogether regret this development, Drake. It is conclusive proof of Christopher's total lack of responsibility. It must convince every one that he is mad and should never have been certified sane. No, I do not altogether regret it. An application, in the right quarter, at the right time, might have desirable results. Surely the authorities will recognize that the administration of a vast fortune cannot be left in the hands of a man who never knows what he is going to do next."

"The greatest people never know what they are going to do next. They are too intent on what they are doing. It's little people who make plans."

Then I added:

"But I'm interested that you are not disturbed by his disappearance."

"My dear Drake, do you really imagine that Christopher could remain hidden for long? He is far too eccentric. I assure you he will be found—directly it is necessary to find him."

But if Teasdale were detached, Buck certainly was not.

He telephoned from Paris one afternoon, and although I had heard nothing from him for many weeks, he wasted no time on preliminaries.

"I haven't rung you to talk about that lunatic's disappearance. It's what he did before he went that interests me. Besides, I knew he'd clear out directly he'd found out everything about us. He knows we're all going to hell—and he wants us to go to hell. But this is the point. You know he went to see Helen's people—the day after she killed herself?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, what the hell do you think he said to them?"

"How should I know?"

"He told them something which made 'em suspicious about me. They keep writing, asking me to go and see them. Now, of course, you know where Christopher is——"

"I haven't a guess."

"But I'm not asking you to tell me. All I want to know is that he's *not* with Helen's people."

"I tell you I haven't a guess where he is!"

"I want to know this too. Has he met the Drewsons! I can't tell you, over the phone, why I want to know, but I *do* want to know. It's damned important."

"I should be very surprised if he's met the Drewsons."

"God, if you knew what a jam I'm in! I can't come back to London. Never mind why, but I *can't*. Teasdale doesn't answer my letters. What with him, and Helen's people, and the Drewsons, I'm damned nearly crazy!"

Then followed abject supplications that I would see Teasdale and persuade him to raise money.

"Tell him I want to go to New York. Tell him I've *got to* go to New York. Teasdale doesn't like scandals. Well, he's making a bigger one than he can guess absolutely certain—if I don't get away to New York, and lie low for a bit. You tell him that. Never mind what he thinks he knows! There's a scandal coming which will make even his hair curl."

By a coincidence which proved to be somewhat dramatic, I had just replaced the receiver when the telephone bell rang and an un-

known voice informed me that Mr. Ernest Mannering wished to speak to me. A moment later, Ernest asked if I would come to his hotel—and that he would regard it as an especial favour if I could come immediately.

An hour later, I found him in a small elegantly furnished sitting-room overlooking the Park. He had the gift of making a room seem uniquely his own, but it was a triumph that he could create this illusion with a sitting-room in a London hotel.

"It was good of you to come—especially as you have reason to be worried on your own account."

"I don't know that I am particularly worried about anything."

"Really? As Christopher has vanished, he may not want a companion any longer. If he does, why didn't he take you with him? But we will not discuss that eccentric gentleman, who has evidently had a total loss of memory. Doubtless he will be found and certified again. This time, I hope, finally."

He paused, then asked:

"Have you ever been amused by your own stupidity?"

"Not often. What stupidity have you committed which has amused you?"

"I have overlooked the obvious."

"And the obvious is?"

"Buck."

I stared at him.

"That evidently surprises you, but, after all, Buck knows everything about certain people in whom I am—interested. Also, Buck is very short of money. Isn't it obvious that he could be induced to give me—information?"

It was obvious enough, but what surprised me was that Ernest had abandoned his former standards so completely that he had decided to buy information from Buck.

"I don't want you to give me Buck's address in Paris," he went on, "but I do want you to forward this letter to him."

He handed me a letter which I put into my pocket.

"One other thing, Drake, if you are not in a hurry. It's about that absurd meeting with Christopher at Meridian Square. I had not expected to find Iris and Douglas—to say nothing of my good lady—waiting to see Christopher. It's delightful, of course, to meet one's nearest and dearest—but one should be warned."

Then he added irritably:

"The whole thing was just a fakir's trick on Christopher's part."

"You evidently agree with Teasdale. He thinks that Christopher uses occult knowledge which he picked up in the East."

"That's not Teasdale's theory. It's mine. It's amusing that he's adopted it, because he clearly thought it nonsense when I suggested it to him."

A few minutes later, he walked down the corridor with me, then said as we were waiting for the lift:

"Douglas tells me that Iris is certain she could have *managed* Christopher—if she had seen him alone. And my lady holds precisely the same opinion. Evidently, therefore, they have had what Rupert once described as a tart-to-tart talk together."

As I walked home through the Park, I realized that the scandal which had long threatened the Mannering-Teasdale world was imminent. Buck was desperate for money, so Ernest would soon know the facts about Iris and Ethel—and their relations with Purvis and the Drewsons. Once Ernest discovered the truth, he would lose his last vestige of faith in Harold Teasdale. His affairs would be taken out of Teasdale's hands, and another lawyer would begin divorce proceedings against Ethel. So the Mannering-Teasdale explosion was only a few days distant.

I was speculating on the intensity and extent of that explosion as I turned into Meridian Square—and almost collided with Rupert Mannering.

"How very amusing!" he exclaimed. "I went to the house to see you but had to leave because that repellent Douglas arrived. He's waiting for you. You're still here, then? I thought Christopher would have given you a month's notice. Shall we walk round the Square? I haven't seen you for a long time."

A number of things became clear to me as we strolled round the Square together, and the first was that Rupert had become a superman again. Christopher's disappearance did not disturb him in the least, as he was now financially independent, and his sole purpose in coming to see me was to flaunt that independence. He made that very clear. So clear, that I understood for the first time how deeply humiliated he had been by our last two meetings, neither of which had provided an appropriate background for a spiritual genius. Rupert had the pride of Lucifer, and it must therefore have been a martyrdom for him to have been discovered almost in the act of going through the letters on my desk when I had returned home unexpectedly on that September afternoon. And it must have been even worse when, some months later, he had been forced to beg me to use my influence with Teasdale, who was "blackmailing" him.

It was not altogether surprising, therefore, that Rupert had avoided me, although he must have longed to parade his new-found independence for my benefit. I believe he delayed that triumph in the

hope that a reverse in my own fortunes would provide him with an effective background. He evidently thought that Christopher's disappearance was a reverse, for he hinted repeatedly at the probability that I should soon find myself without a job.

"Don't worry unduly," he announced airily. "There are big developments in my affairs and I might be able to find something for you. All sorts of quite ordinary people are altering in the most remarkable way as a result of chaotic conditions. A spiritual revival is certain. People know nowadays that a total change is essential. Half-measures are no good. You can't alter hell by rearranging the furniture."

I said I agreed with him.

Then, as we continued to walk round the Square, he gave a diagnosis of the spiritual state of Europe, and although I knew this diagnosis was largely a synthesis of borrowed ideas, it was impossible not to admire the skill with which he presented it. Rupert juggled so expertly with theories that one watched rather than listened and—as one watched him—his power over a certain type of woman was easily understood. The slender Rupert with his light-blue eyes and ascetic features seemed the apotheosis of the "spiritual" type. Here was a "priest" if ever there were one, and, as sex did not exist for him, it follows that his power over "idealistic" women was almost unlimited. It did not surprise me that, after Belinda's escape, he had found another lady who had been eager to endow him with all her worldly goods. But I was glad for her sake that the administration of those goods was in Teasdale's hands.

Rupert ended by saying:

"Every day more people realize that everything is corrupt. They couldn't tell you why, but that means nothing. You do not need to know the origin of a stink in order to smell it."

"I think that's profoundly true—but I may be prejudiced."

He glanced at me quickly, flushed, then said:

"I must go. You'll find that animal, Douglas, waiting for you."

I watched his immaculate figure saunter down the Square. He was carrying his black soft hat, and his long fair hair fluttered in the breeze. He hailed a taxi when he reached the corner and, as I watched him give the driver directions, I again felt slightly irritated by the knowledge that Rupert would survive, no matter what happened to the other Mannerings.

I found Douglas waiting for me in the Yellow Room.

"Thank God you've come, old boy! Couldn't stand this room for another minute. There's something damned queer about the whole house."

He glanced round apprehensively, then added:

"God! I'll never forget the way Christopher came into this room—and the four of us started quarrelling like hell. Even Ernest! *Ernest.* That's what put the wind up me. Anyway, let's get out of here. Where shall we go?"

I suggested The Red Star.

"Wait a minute! What's the date?"

I told him.

"What's the time? Six o'clock? Well, let's think. It's Friday, isn't it?"

I said that it was, whereupon Douglas made some intricate mathematical calculations, then announced that we could go to The Red Star as the barmaid, Kitty, would *not* be there.

"I'm in a maze, old boy. Been in a maze for weeks, or I'd have looked you up before this. Come on, let's go! This show gives me the jitters."

When we reached the Square, he pointed to the house, then gave his great laugh and said:

"Christopher's cleared out—and that's the end of us."

"Why?"

"What the hell's the good of asking me why? I've no more brains than this bloody pavement! Directly I heard he'd gone, I knew we were done for."

Then he stopped and asked:

"Did you see that rat, Rupert?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"Rupert! Lives on women—and thinks he's Jesus Christ! Damn it all, that's an achievement in its way. I say! Have you got the price of a taxi to spare? I want some drinks—and want 'em quick!"

"All right. We'll have a taxi."

When we reached The Red Star, Douglas again made intricate mathematical calculations to prove that Kitty would *not* be on duty but, nevertheless, he eventually decided to go somewhere else.

"Let's try The Griffin—just off St. Martin's Lane. It's safer. We'll go upstairs—there won't be any one there."

When we were seated at a corner table in a dreary room, the walls of which were adorned with faded photographs of long-dead theatrical celebrities, Douglas had a couple of drinks in rapid succession, then blurted out that he now had no illusions about Iris's fidelity and that he would have to divorce her directly Ernest told him to start proceedings.

"Directly he says the word, old boy. God! What the hell will I do if they give me custody of the kids! Iris is no good—and I'm

no good. That's why we belong. Why couldn't that bastard, Ernest, leave us alone? But he gives me money for drinks, so I promise anything. I haven't been home for days. I'm damned if I know when I was home last!"

He lit a cigarette, then went on:

"Ernest thinks he's got it all set. He's going to divorce Ethel—then marry money. But he's a dead man, old boy. I look at him—I listen to him—and I say to myself: 'You're there—you're talking—but you're a dead man, all the same.' He's been dead a damned long time. The poor bastard was born dead."

His laugh echoed through the room, then he leaned over the table and said:

"D'you know I'm bloody frightened? Sometimes when I've had a few drinks I suddenly think of her with those men—I *see* her with them—and then I go so crazy that I could murder her with my bare hands."

He rose as if he had decided to go, then fell back into his chair and exclaimed:

"Listen! Tell you something. I'm pretty certain Buck's had her. Then passed her on to Purvis and Drewson. And suppose it's true, well, who's fault is it? Mine, old boy! Nobody's but mine!"

He muttered to himself for a bit, then began to laugh again.

"D'you know where Ernest's going? Going to Paris. Going to see Buck. Says he'll find out everything. That's funny. That's a damned sight funnier than Ernest will ever know. God! We must have another drink on that. But Ethel won't think it funny, if she hears that Ernest is going to Paris to see Buck."

He called for another drink, then went on:

"Tell you something else. You know that girl Helen who committed suicide? She's having her revenge on the whole lot of 'em. The dead haunt the living. I don't mean they appear as ghosts. I mean something a damn' sight more terrible. Why, blast it, *I'm* haunted. I'm haunted by the man I ought to have been. *He* haunts me. Looks over my shoulder when I'm shaving. Sometimes, when I'm sleeping with Kitty, I wake in the middle of the night, and there he is at the foot of the bed, looking at me. Nothing dies. That's the hell of it—nothing dies!"

As the evening progressed, he became so incoherent that I could follow only a fraction of what he said, but it was useless to suggest leaving him as he became violent and once nearly got us into a scrap with a sailor, who was the only other occupant of the room.

When closing time arrived, we went on to The Rat-Hole, where everything was exactly the same as it had been on our last visit.

The same flaccid individual greeted us: the same nondescript men and women were dancing in the low-pitched oblong room with its red-distempered walls: and we sat at the same table. The atmosphere was dense with tobacco smoke: the orchestra as scrappy as ever: the same derelict waiter attended to us.

Douglas began a long account of his relations with the barmaid, Kitty, at The Red Star, but, apart from the fact that they had quarrelled about something, I could make little of it. The only coherent statement in this chaotic harangue was the frequently repeated one that I must not mention Kitty to Ernest or Iris.

Towards one in the morning, just before Douglas passed out, he had a brief lucid interval.

"D'you know the only Mannering worth a damn? You don't? It isn't Arthur, who's still in America. He's a super-crawler. Absolutely! He'll marry a rich American girl—and run a harem on her money. It isn't that bastard. It's Sir Michael."

"You think he's the best of the lot?"

"'Course he is! He's the only one of us who isn't as twisted as a bloody corkscrew. He's got vitality—although he's eighty. Think any of us will live to eighty? Not damn' likely! D'you know what he said when he heard Christopher had cleared off?"

"No, I don't. And I don't see how you do, because Sir Michael has been in the country for over a week."

"I know that. He's been away with a girl called Linda. Ernest found out where he was and rang him up when Christopher cleared off—and the old man said he wasn't surprised Christopher couldn't stand the family. That's what the old man said—and it made Ernest writhe with anger."

He had another whisky, then said unevenly:

"Ernest's a snake. D'you know that? He moves like a snake. You don't see him: you don't hear him. And he strikes like a snake. He's so full of hatred that his blood has turned to venom."

Then he exclaimed melodramatically:

"He's destroyed me! Yes, he *has*, I tell you! He wriggled into my affairs. He made me find out the truth about Iris. Christ! D'you think I wanted to know the truth about her? Or about myself —or any one else. He's done me in far worse than if he'd murdered me."

He had another drink, and a few minues later he passed out—and slid to the floor.

I got the old waiter and we carried Douglas to the broken-down sofa on which we had deposited him at the end of our last visit. Then I gave George some money and left The Rat-Hole.

It was a gusty night, and, as I walked through the dark, deserted streets, the depression I had known since the disappearance of Rosa and Christopher deepened until I felt that I could not go on with my present existence for another day. Everything had become drab, dreary, lifeless. To be with Rosa or Christopher was to experience a new consciousness—a different level of being—an awareness of brotherhood. Consequently, to find oneself alone was to endure the desolation of exile. For the first time in my life I could imagine the suffering of a saint whose faith falters; or the suffering of a great artist whose vision flickers and fades.

But as I walked on through the gusty darkness, I remembered how Rosa had asked me if I had reached the point when I would not be surprised whatever happened, even if I couldn't make it add up to anything, and I realized—now—that she had asked this in order to prepare me for her sudden departure.

When I reached Meridian Square, I felt that my exile had meaning and purpose—that I had a part to play in the last act of the Mannering drama.

Three days later, the curtain rose on the last act.

CHAPTER II

Bombshell

AFTER Rosa's departure, I spent very little time at Meridian Square. I shut most of the rooms—engaged a daily woman to do the essential work—and I went out for meals. I even had breakfast at a café, but this did not worry me, as I had become accustomed to it during the many years I had lived abroad. Actually, I rather enjoyed walking to a café near Piccadilly Circus in the early morning when there was a wind-swept sky and a hint of fragrance in the air.

But three days after my meeting with Douglas, I woke to hear rain lashing the pane and gusts of wind rocking the trees in the Square, so there was no question of walking to Piccadilly. I took a bus to the Circus—and spent much longer than usual over breakfast, owing to an interesting book I had picked up just before leaving the house, with the result that I did not leave the café till after ten o'clock.

When I returned to Meridian Square, I found the willowy gentleman from Teasdale's office waiting for me. I gathered he had been there some time and had orders to remain till I returned.

"Mr. Teasdale telephoned me, sir, directly he saw the news," he said deferentially. "I have the telephone at my flat, but the office pays for it—naturally." He gave a self-effacing little cough. "Mr. Teasdale is most anxious to see you before all his clients hear the news and come rushing to his office."

"What news? I don't know what you're talking about."

"But you've seen the morning paper, sir?"

"No, I haven't seen it."

"Then you don't know that Mr. Christopher has given the whole of his fortune to the Beulah Island people? It's in all the papers, sir. He's given the whole of his fortune to the Beulahites. He hasn't kept a penny for himself. That proves he's mad, sir, don't you think?"

"He may think that the Beulahites are a better investment than the Mannerings."

"There are all sorts of rumours. They say the Beulahites may leave Europe shortly. And it has been discovered that there are a great many of them—far more than any one imagined. But just think, sir—the whole of Mr. Christopher's fortune!"

"What's Mr. Teasdale say about it?"

"He must be disturbed, sir, or he would not have telephoned me before eight o'clock, asking me to come straight to you."

Then the willowy gentleman added:

"But he won't be the only one to be disturbed. Not by a long way."

"Well, as he wants to see me so urgently, we had better get a taxi and go to Lincoln's Inn."

During the drive, the willowy gentleman talked a good deal, but, as his remarks were only an amplification of what he had already said, I ceased to listen and looked at him with some curiosity.

On previous occasions I had always been impressed by the willowy gentleman's ape-like mimicry of Teasdale, but I now recognized how superficial that mimicry was. It related only to clothes and certain attitudes, for my companion had none of the lawyer's dominating manner in dealing with others. On the contrary, he seemed anxious to proclaim that he was a person of no importance whatever, but, as I knew that Teasdale would not employ any one without ability—even in a humble capacity—I began to study him more closely.

He had very small but very keen eyes, ferrety features, and a mouth which was a perfect example of Euclid's definition of a straight line. Also, despite his subservience, you felt that this man was confident enough at centre. All the superficial "Teasdale" mannerisms were concessions to his social superiors—subtle little recognitions of their importance—but, underneath, the willowy gentleman was quite sure of himself and his place in the scheme of things.

Having drawn my attention to the news-posters, most of which featured the NEW CHRISTOPHER SENSATION, my companion said:

"If I may say so, sir, you do not seem very surprised that Mr. Christopher has given the whole of his fortune to the Beulahites."

"I'm not in the least surprised."

"Really?"

"Not in the least—for two reasons. One is that nothing he could do would surprise me. And the other is that, directly he disappeared, I guessed he'd reached a decision of some kind."

"Other people are going to be surprised—very surprised and very disturbed. Mr. Teasdale will have a busy day."

On arriving at Lincoln's Inn Fields, we found a number of cars outside Teasdale's offices, and, directly we entered the perpetual twilight of the hall, a buzz of animated conversation on the floor above greeted us.

"I thought it would be like this, sir," the willowy gentleman

announced, "but if you would not mind following me I'll soon find a way through this crowd."

And he certainly did find a way through the crowd on the well-worn stairs—in the corridor—and in the ENQUIRIES room. Eventually, slightly flushed with triumph, he turned to me and said:

"Mr. Teasdale is in the conference room, sir. I suggest you go in while I get rid of these people. There's no chance of their seeing Mr. Teasdale to-day."

Then he added:

"I don't think you've been in the conference room since you attended the family council nearly a year ago."

"No, not since then." Then I said, indicating my hat and stick: "Perhaps you'd look after these for me."

"Certainly, sir, of course."

I opened the door of the conference room and went in.

The room was full of people, but, on this occasion, my appearance did not create the slightest interest. Vincent Drake had always been a nobody of course, but, once, he had represented Christopher and so had positively shone with reflected glory. Now, he was but a trifle here. It is true that he was still Christopher's companion, but that did not mean a thing, for Christopher was no longer the owner of a vast fortune. So, after the briefest of glances, conversations were resumed—and I was free to study the assembled company.

It consisted of a number of groups—Teasdale being the centre of the largest and the most vociferous. Among these various groups ranged near the big table I noticed several of the persons I had met at the family council.

It was pleasant to catch another glimpse of the aristocratic old lady with the piercing black eyes and the formidable features who had been so eager to know whether I was a Barset or a Riverham Drake. Then, in another group, I saw the parson, who kept removing his pince-nez from his long slender nose in order to polish the lenses. And it was with peculiar delight that I spotted the ancient lady of the hawk-like features and indomitable eyes, who had been so confident that God would not permit Christopher to give his fortune to charity.

As every one talked simultaneously it was not easy to pick out individual sentences, but, now and again, certain remarks became audible above the general buzz of conversation.

On one occasion I heard the parson say:

"One is—naturally—slow to criticize, but I must say that I find Sir Michael's conduct reprehensible. He is the head of the family—and he refuses to come to London. I telephoned him early this

morning—only to be told that, in his opinion, Christopher could do what he liked with his own money. Yes, I know it is difficult to believe, but that is what he said. One is, of course, unwilling to impute unworthy motives to any one. Naturally! But one is forced—literally forced—to the conclusion that Sir Michael's intimacy with a young factory girl—oh yes, I assure you, a *factory* girl!—is the real reason why he repudiates his responsibilities in this highly reprehensible manner."

Later, I heard a man in another group say:

"Ernest's in Paris. Otherwise, he'd be here. But he's coming back immediately—any moment! In fact, he may be on his way. He may turn up any minute now."

So far as I could make out, the members of the group round Teasdale were demanding to know whether action could be taken to prove that Christopher was not responsible for his actions, and that therefore the transfer of his fortune to the Beulahites could be rendered null and void. Surely, they argued, this act did prove, once and for all, that Christopher was insane. Could not Teasdale, therefore, take action with the proper authorities? The man was a madman. He should never have been certified sane. He had now *proved* he was insane. Surely something could be done. And so on. And so on.

Teasdale adopted a characteristic technique to deal with this barrage of amateur advice. He stood motionless—listened to each speaker in turn with an expression of expectant attention—and said nothing. As he was the only person present whose opinion on the subject under discussion had any value, his silence eventually dominated the proceedings. He waited till its dominion had become absolute, then said to the company at large:

"Ladies and gentlemen. I have listened to all you have to say. I found it interesting and instructive, of course, but I do suggest that, if you wish me to take action on any of the various plans put forward, that action will be seriously delayed by your presence here. I am going to suggest, therefore—quite frankly—that you go now and leave me to do what I think best."

As usual, Teasdale's technique proved effective. Five minutes later, we were alone.

He made a characteristic movement with his hands, then crossed to the table and pressed a concealed bell-push. In due course the willowy gentleman appeared.

"Have they gone?"

"All but three, sir—and they are going."

"Very well. There's nothing else."

Directly the willowy gentleman had vanished, Teasdale turned to me and said:

"Let us go to my office. I have three questions to ask you, but, naturally, you need not answer any of them."

When we were seated in his private office, he said in the same somewhat weary tone:

"Have you heard from Christopher since he disappeared?"

"Not a line."

"Did you know that he intended to give his fortune away?"

"No. He never told me any of his plans—if he makes plans—which I doubt."

"And you do not know where he is?"

"I haven't a guess."

After a long silence, I added:

"By the way, Buck telephoned me the other day. He says you ignore his letters, but he wants you to know that, unless he gets money to go to New York, there will be a bigger scandal than even you've ever imagined."

Teasdale made a movement with his hands, implying that he could not bother about trifles, then the telephone bell rang—and for the next five minutes I listened to Teasdale's end of a conversation which conveyed nothing whatever to me.

He replaced the receiver, then, just as I was about to suggest that I should go, the door opened and the willowy gentleman announced:

"Mr. Ernest Mannering."

We both rose, but no one spoke. Even after the willowy gentleman had disappeared, we remained silent. Ernest was standing near the door, holding a letter in his left hand.

At last Teasdale went over to him.

"I am delighted to see you. Did I hear that you've been to Paris?"

"Yes—to see Buck."

After a pause, Ernest went on:

"Buck came back to London with me. I made him come. He wants to see you."

"That's very interesting. But do sit down."

"It isn't worth it. I am going almost immediately."

There was a long silence.

I felt I was watching a duel—a duel with invisible weapons.

"Buck returned with me," Ernest said at last. "He's rather surprised that you've never looked him up—on one of your many visits to Paris. He says you go there fairly regularly. Also, he thinks that

some of the letters he has written to you must have gone astray—as he has had no answers. He wants to see you to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"I shall be delighted, of course."

"At what time?"

"At any time convenient to him. He will find me here—waiting for him."

"I will tell him. Otherwise, I called only to give you this."

Ernest handed him the letter.

A moment later, he went out of the room.

Teasdale threw the letter on to the table, then said:

"There's no need to read that. Ernest is removing his affairs from this office. His letter states that fact—and gives me the name of his new lawyer."

He crossed to the window, then stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking down at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"It is an interesting fact, Drake, that there is something satisfactory about finality—just because it is finality."

When I left, he was still in the same attitude by the window.

I went to the ENQUIRIES room to get my hat and stick, which the willowy gentleman produced with his usual subservience.

"People are not very considerate, sir. I told Mr. Ernest that Mr. Teasdale was busy, but he insisted on seeing him. He said it was most important. And yet he was in Mr. Teasdale's room for a very few minutes."

"He only wanted to give him a letter."

"Really?"

Then he added.

"I could have given a letter to Mr. Teasdale. People are not very considerate, sir."

He picked up a small attaché case, then informed me that he had to take some documents to a client before he went to lunch. As he had been delayed, he was going to take a taxi, and he wondered if he could drop me anywhere.

I suggested he should put me down at Piccadilly Circus, which, he said, would be on his route.

A few minutes later, we left the office together.

CHAPTER III

Panic at Meridian Square

I

THE next day. . . .

I had lunched in Soho and left the restaurant soon after two o'clock, then wandered through back streets till I emerged eventually in Piccadilly Circus—where I stood for some minutes watching the passers-by.

There was no need to look at the news-posters in order to realize that international tension was tautening almost hourly. The German occupation of Prague, and the Good Friday invasion of Albania by Italy, had convinced even the most complacent that Europe was taking giant strides towards catastrophe. For years, psychological war had been raging, but, now, every one was aware of it—and of its inevitable issue. Every day the facts became more fantastic; every hour uncertainty spread like a miasma. Hope had become a refugee —and truth a casualty.

I do not know how long I stood outside the Monico, watching the chaos of the traffic and the hurrying crowds of harassed pedestrians, but, eventually, I bought a lunch edition of an evening paper and glanced at the headlines. Then, just as I was about to put the paper under my arm, I noticed a paragraph near the bottom of the front page.

DEATH OF WELL-KNOWN SOLICITOR

Mr. Harold Teasdale, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, was found dead in his office early to-day. Last night he told the housekeeper he would be staying late and that she need not wait. On going to his office at eight this morning, she found that the door of Mr. Teasdale's room was locked. As she could get no reply, she fetched a policeman. It is understood that the deceased had been dead for some hours—and that a small phial was found on the floor of his room. Investigations are proceeding. Mr. Teasdale was honorary solicitor to several well-known charities.

I stood motionless—hearing nothing, seeing nothing.

I read the paragraph again, stopping after every sentence, trying to realize its implications.

Then I crossed the Circus and began to walk down Piccadilly.

One after another, in rapid succession, memories of various incidents concerning Teasdale darted in and out of my mind, and I knew that—later—these memories would form a definite pattern in relation to his death. But—now—the fact that he *was* dead dominated my imagination. Dominated it so completely that I said the word, "dead," aloud, more than once, in order to convince myself that it represented a reality.

Then something so remarkable happened that to this day I feel queer whenever I think of it. Suddenly I saw Teasdale. I saw him as clearly as if he had risen before me. We were alone, facing each other in spectral solitude. There was an ironical glint in the bold probing eyes, and a frozen smile on the thin proud lips.

Fortunately, however, I was jerked back to the actual world by colliding in no uncertain manner with a man hurrying in the opposite direction. We both said "Sorry!" although the blame was entirely mine, and I then discovered that I had reached Hyde Park Corner.

I stood for some moments looking round, as dazed as an owl in daylight, till I suddenly realized that Harold Teasdale had committed *suicide*. The sinister possibilities of that fact gradually emerged like mountain peaks through filmy mist. Unless his suicide had been caused by some tragedy unconnected with his professional activities, it could have only one explanation—and one which would bring ruin to the Mannering-Teasdale world.

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to three. The daily woman did not leave till three o'clock, so, if I went to the house immediately, I should be able to find out whether any one had telephoned.

I hailed a taxi, then told the driver to go to Meridian Square just as quickly as he could.

II

When I opened the front door, such a commotion greeted me that I half-thought I had entered the wrong house.

For some moments I stood bewildered, then gradually discovered that a babel of conversation was coming from the Blue Room—that various people whom I had never met were talking on the stairs—and that an unknown man was shouting into the telephone at the end of the hall.

All this was so totally unexpected that some time passed before I

became aware of the daily woman, who was staring at me with an expression of ludicrous perplexity.

I beckoned her over.

"What's all this?"

"Oh, don't ask me, sir!"

"But what happened?"

"What happened! What didn't happen! About half-past twelve the telephone starts ringing. No sooner do I put it down than it starts ringing again. Then people began banging on the front door. I thought the house was on fire. In they come! Wouldn't take 'no' for an answer!"

She pointed to the Blue Room.

"Trooped in there, they did, although I told them it was shut up and the curtains drawn and the furniture covered with dust-sheets. But in they go—and switch on the lights. Where were you? That's what they kept asking. When would you be in? Had you gone away? And all the time more of 'em coming and asking the same questions. I never see anything like it in the whole of my born days!"

"Well, you'd better go now. I'm sorry you got let in for all this."

I piloted her to the front door, then went into the Blue Room.

It was full of people standing about, talking emphatically, and making vigorous gestures.

It would have seemed strange enough to find this miscellaneous collection in a normal setting, but to discover these people in the disused Blue Room—with its shrouded furniture, drawn curtains, and lights on—made me feel that I had stepped from sunlight into the phantom drama of a dream.

This sensation was a fleeting one, however, for my appearance occasioned such a salvo of questions that I soon forgot my surroundings. Before I had glanced at half the occupants of the room, I found myself the centre of concentric circles of excited people, every one of whom seemed to be talking simultaneously. Such a blur of faces ringed me that it was some moments before I recognized Ernest and Douglas Mannering, Iris and Ethel, and some of the people I had seen the day before at Harold Teasdale's office.

Soon, however, one fact became very prominent—these people were frightened. They were so frightened that for the time being all former antagonisms had vanished. If Teasdale had killed himself because he had committed fraud, then, probably, every one in this room was ruined. That stark possibility caused a temporary reconciliation not only between Douglas and Iris, but between Ernest and

Ethel. Fear creates a negative unity. People stop quarrelling when they find that the house is on fire.

"Well, what d'you think?—what d'you think? You were about the last to be with him."

I hardly recognised Ernest's voice. He was a study in suppressed fear as he stood there, gnawing his underlip, looking at me obliquely.

"What did he say when he opened my letter? What did he *say*?"

"He didn't open it. He said there was no need, as he knew what was in it."

"There you are!" Ethel exclaimed. "I told you it was nothing to do with the letter. Nothing! Of course it wasn't! He guessed long ago that you were going to change your lawyer."

Ernest turned to her and they began to talk in quick, jerky sentences—excitedly exploring this trail of hope.

Someone else began to question me, but Douglas caught hold of my arm and swung me round to him.

"Listen! Damn it, do you really think Teasdale was a wrong 'un? Hell, it's impossible! It doesn't matter to me, but every bob Iris has got is in his hands. Every bob——"

But Iris cut in:

"You don't think he killed himself because—— You don't do you? You *can't* think that! He managed to break my marriage settlement, so every farthing I'd got was in his hands! My God—you don't think . . ."

"I don't know what to think," I said. "I've only just heard of his death." Then I asked: "Where's Buck? He was going to Teasdale's office this morning."

"He's coming any minute. He telephoned just now. He's at Lincoln's Inn—trying to find out something."

She caught hold of my arm.

"Come over here." She pulled me away from the others, then went on: "Listen! They won't make his private papers public, will they? You know, instructions from clients and all that? Or—or anything he knew about his clients?"

"No, of course not."

"You're—*certain*?"

"Quite certain."

Then an unknown man came up to me, but he talked so incoherently that I ceased to listen and looked round.

These people were so frightened that it was imperative for them to believe what they hoped; consequently any one who argued optimistically instantly became the centre of attention—enthusiastic,

pathetic attention. And, conversely, any one who hinted at the possibility of disaster soon found he had lost his audience.

"I'll tell you something funny!" Douglas exclaimed in a voice which commanded general attention. "After all, you must laugh—damn it! That rat Rupert's got a hell of a wind up! I went to his place before coming here. He's got a hell of a wind up, and so has that woman of his who backed him. Every ha'penny she's got is in Teasdale's hands. They're both damned nearly dead with fright. Hysterical—both of 'em! Screaming at each other like a couple of maniacs! That's not so hot for a feller who thinks he's Jesus Christ!"

His great laugh rang out, but no one responded. Fear is contagious, so there was danger in realizing that Rupert was afraid.

Tension was relaxed, however, when the parson, who had been at Teasdale's office the day before, gave a reasoned and optimistic explanation of the lawyer's suicide.

On this occasion he did not continually remove his pince-nez and he did not keep darting his tongue through his tightly-compressed lips. And he did not qualify every sentence almost out of existence. He spoke clearly and rapidly in a high tenor voice.

"I have come to the conclusion that there is no cause for alarm. Teasdale was a man of the highest principles. That Harold Teasdale could be associated with any—irregularities—is unthinkable. His whole life was one long selfless devotion to the affairs of his clients."

"Still, the damned feller's killed himself, hasn't he?" Douglas demanded.

The parson ignored the interruption.

"I have no doubt it will soon be established that our friend, Teasdale, was suffering from an incurable disease. That is not just hope—I believe it will prove to be the fact. Or he may have committed suicide as the result of a sudden fit of insanity. He has overtaxed his strength on our behalf for years. Any one who believes that Harold Teasdale killed himself because he had been guilty of—irregularities—is doing his memory a grave injustice."

This declaration met the need of his audience, for it gave hope a logical structure. After all, Teasdale might have had cancer—or he might have gone mad. Things weren't so black as they looked. One oughtn't to lose faith. And—when you came to think of it—it was unbelievable that Teasdale could have been guilty of—irregularities. You had only to visualize him in order to be convinced of the absurdity of such a suspicion. No, it was all right! Everything was all right. Very sad, of course, and all that—but they were not menaced. *They* were safe.

Little separate conversations flickered up—each being an optimistic variation on the parson's theme. Here was a chance to banish the spectre of fear, and they exploited it to the limit. Especially Ernest and Ethel. No one seeing them now, for the first time, could have believed that only a few hours ago hatred had separated them like a barrier of ice.

These optimistic variations on the parson's theme gradually merged and had attained almost full-orchestral dimensions, when they suddenly made a precipitous descent into silence.

Buck strode noisily into the room. He had come from Lincoln's Inn Fields. And there was something in his manner, and something in the expression of his eyes, which was not reassuring.

"I don't like the look of it."

An inaudible gasp seemed to fill the room.

"I'm damned if I like the look of it! And you won't either. And that Bank manager feller—Quiddle—don't like the look of it. He telephoned Lincoln's Inn twice this morning. But *here's* the point. You know that clerk of Teasdale's—the one who used to sit in the ENQUIRIES room? Well, he's disappeared."

This announcement created a new shudder.

"He didn't turn up this morning. So they telephoned his flat. No reply. So they sent someone round. He's cleared out—and that's not all."

"He's of no importance," Ernest said contemptuously. "He was only a clerk."

"Don't you believe it! He was Teasdale's *confidential* clerk. Oh yes, he was—although he sat in the ENQUIRIES room. That feller probably knows plenty about most of us, because he made all the confidential inquiries for Teasdale. He was much more important than the clerks in the general office on the floor above. Anyway, he's cleared off. *And* he's taken some confidential papers with him."

"But—but——"

"There aren't any buts! I'm telling you facts—and a hell of a job I had to get 'em. The police did not want to let me into the place at all."

Buck produced a flask from his hip-pocket and took a long pull from it.

They stood like frozen figures, watching his most trivial action as if tremendous issues depended on it.

"Don't forget that I was at his office at ten o'clock. He was just as the policeman had found him—sitting in his chair, sprawling across the table, his right arm hanging down. He had a kind of grin on his face. Damned uncanny, I can tell you!"

"Yes, yes, of course!" the parson said hastily. "You are—naturally—very upset. That's quite understandable. But we really must keep things in perspective. After all, we do not yet know for certain that Teasdale killed himself."

"Then who killed him? The office cat?"

"I admit it looks like suicide, but we don't *know* that it was. And we really have no reason whatever for assuming that Teasdale has been guilty of—irregularities. All the evidence points the other way. He was a bachelor. He was devoted to his profession. There was no sign of extravagance in his life."

"Are you certain? Did you ever go to his Piccadilly flat? Those pictures, prints, and china didn't cost nothing. If you don't believe me, ask Ernest—because he knows about things like that."

Almost immediately, Buck went on:

"Here's something else you may not know. Teasdale had a flat in Paris. Oh yes, he had! And it, too, was full of things that did not cost tuppence. I never went to it, but I know a man who did. Met him a few days ago. It doesn't matter where, but he knew Teasdale and had been to his flat—often. And he wasn't exactly a churchwarden. You can take that from me."

They stood staring at him as if he had hypnotized them. These new facts could not be ignored—any more than exploding bombs can be ignored.

"Ask yourselves some questions," Buck went on ruthlessly. "Haven't most of you tried to get Teasdale to realize capital for you during the last year or two? Did he do it? I know that I told him to raise capital for me and he refused. You can ask Drake, if you don't believe me. He was there. He knows. But when Teasdale gets a letter from Ernest, *instructing* him to hand over Ernest's affairs to another lawyer, what does Teasdale do? Outs himself—within a few hours! Well, *why*? Coincidence?"

The silence of Judgment Day gripped the room, but at last Douglas lurched over to him and said angrily:

"If you're right, you're ruined—aren't you? Or perhaps you've thought of a way of saving your own rotten skin!"

"Facts are facts. They don't alter because fools and drunkards don't like 'em. I shan't have a bob if Teasdale was a wrong 'un. But I've never had any use for fairy tales, and I haven't any use for 'em now."

He made an impatient movement with his long arms, then came over to me and said:

"You must know plenty, Drake. You were the last person with any brains to see him, so how did he strike you?"

"I thought he seemed tired. Otherwise, he was the same as usual. When Ernest went, he did not open the letter because he guessed what was in it—so it was clearly no surprise to him."

Buck looked at me intently with his keen small eyes, then said with heavy emphasis:

"You saw quite a lot of him and he'd want to keep in with you, as you were Christopher's companion, so perhaps you know things which we—don't."

"One or two, perhaps. I know that he was usually at his office on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. He said he did that in order to catch up with London arrears caused by his Paris visits. As to his relations with Christopher, so far as I know he saw him only once, but Teasdale told me that he was very anxious to get the administration of Christopher's affairs into his hands, without remuneration to himself."

"D'you hear that!" Buck exclaimed to the others. "Why the devil did he want to do a hell of a lot of work for nothing?"

He turned to me, then went on:

"There's something else I'd like to know. Did he ever say he could put you on to a good thing?"

"Yes, once."

"So he did! I asked, because I've been remembering things, and seeing 'em from a different angle. Foxy Teasdale always brought off something for a client, soon after that client had handed over all his affairs to him. Plenty of people here know that is a fact. Well, I knew he'd try to bribe Drake in order to secure his influence over Christopher. When did he suggest a good thing to you?"

"Some months ago. He wanted me to put five hundred pounds into an investment which, he said, would be a very profitable one."

"And did you?"

"No. I wasn't interested."

Buck turned to the others.

"Just what do you think of *that*? Didn't suggest to any of *us* that *we* should make a packet? Not on your life! If any of us had wanted to invest, it would have meant realizing capital—and that wouldn't have suited Foxy Teasdale. But he could find a good thing for Drake. He could always find a good thing at the *start* of his dealings with a new client. He picked up a cool thousand for me soon after I gave him entire control over my affairs. And I know he did the same for some of you."

A glacial silence followed this ruthless grouping of sinister-seeming facts. They stared at the squat, mottle-faced Buck in his remarkable tweed suit, as if unable to believe that he had dared to shout what

they did not dare to whisper. Nevertheless, although they continued to stand as motionless as figures in a tableau, a hint of suspicion gradually became discernible in the taut, frightened faces.

Why was it that Buck had so much more courage than they had? Why could he look the spectre full in the eyes? If they were ruined, so was he. Or had he a way out? Perhaps all his affairs had not been in Teasdale's hands. Perhaps he had lied when he had said that they were. Perhaps that was why he dared to face the worst.

It soon became evident, however, that most of them were determined to escape from this barrage which blew their hopes to smithereens. They turned away from Buck and began to look round, as if they had suddenly become aware of their surroundings and were wondering what they were doing in this furniture-shrouded room, with its drawn curtains and blazing lights.

They began to split up into little groups and several half-whispered conversations started.

Finding himself deserted, Buck crossed to Iris, who was alone in a corner, then talked to her at length. He stood so near to her that she seemed isolated from the others, but she listened intently and once gave an abrupt laugh.

Ernest was with the parson, who had evidently recovered some of his former optimism, for I heard him say:

"No, no, of course not! Buck always thinks the worst. He is devoid of all moral sense. Teasdale was very wise not to raise capital for him."

After a pause, he went on:

"I am convinced there is nothing to fear. Here's another point which is worth noting. Sir Michael has not even troubled to telephone, which proves that he is not in the least perturbed. After all, he would have most to lose if—if——"

He swallowed, then went on:

"Besides, if there were anything—irregular—in Teasdale's affairs, it is obvious that Christopher would have to do something. Of course he would! Why, if there were anything wrong, most of the Mannerings and most of the Teasdales would be——"

"Quite!" Ernest cut in. "You are perfectly right. There is nothing to worry about. Rupert will feel very ridiculous when he finds that he has collapsed for no reason whatever, but I suppose that stupid woman of his became hysterical and so he lost his nerve."

Ernest looked round, saw that Ethel was at the other side of the room, then added:

"I think we'd better go—at once! There's no need for any formality."

Evidently he regretted his recent *rapprochement* with Ethel and had no intention of allowing her to exploit it.

Soon there was a general exodus. Ethel left with the military-looking man, whom I had not seen since the family council, and a few moments later Buck and Iris went. He was holding her arm and she seemed rather amused by something he had said.

Before very long I found myself alone with Douglas.

He pulled a dust-sheet from an armchair, seated himself with a whistling sigh of relief, then announced:

"Well, old boy, they're all in the same boat with me now. Every man-jack of them!"

"You're certain, then, that Teasdale was a wrong 'un?"

"'Course I am! And so are you!"

I said nothing, so he exclaimed:

"Well? Aren't you?"

"I'm certain of only one thing, and that is—Teasdale had a very good reason for committing suicide."

"I'll say he had! It's the end of our lot—bar Buck. He's more cunning than all the rest of us rolled together. He always gets away with everything. I know he's had an affair with Iris, but I can't do a thing about it. You can't take a moral attitude on a background like mine. I'd be leaving myself wide open for a knock-out. And Buck knows it. No one better."

After a long silence, I said:

"If you're right—if the whole lot of them are ruined—Iris will be about the only one who will have anything left. After all, she can go back to her people."

"Live in the Midlands! With her people! And look after the kids! *Iris!*"

"Perhaps you're right."

"Iris—with her people, and the kids, in the Midlands! God, what a pipe-dream! She's a gutter-soul, old boy. Like me. So she'll go to the gutter—not the Midlands."

Then he went on:

"Did I tell you her mother died a month or so ago? She won't get much change out of her father. He'd be glad to give her an allowance to get out of the country and stay out of it. One thing's certain—he won't have her near the kids."

Then he said, as if he were talking to himself:

"I'm too burnt out even to be jealous of her. I just watch things happen nowadays—and they don't seem to mean a thing. It's bloody awful!"

He lit a cigarette, then sat staring in front of him for some minutes, but at last he got up and said:

"I'll have to go and see Kitty. It's too long a story, but we're in a hell of a jam."

He went towards the door, then came back.

"Listen, old boy. You've been damned generous, but could you let me have a quid? I'll see you have it back."

I gave him a note and a moment later he went out of the room.

I picked up the dust-sheet and was draping it round the arm-chair when I heard a sound behind me. I looked round to find Douglas.

"I lied just now. I *shan't* let you have this quid back! You'll never get a ha'penny back of all the money you've let me have. Not a damned ha'penny! What's the good of lying?"

"That's all right."

He waved his hand, then went out of the room. A moment later, the front door banged.

I went to the hall to make certain they had all gone, but there was no one to be seen and not a sound to be heard. I stood for some minutes, too bewildered to think consecutively, then it occurred to me that I ought to let Arthur Mannering know about Teasdale's suicide. For all I knew he might be affected, and in any event he had given me the job of companion to Christopher.

So I went out and cabled Arthur—to his forwarding address in New York—simply stating the stark fact that Harold Teasdale had committed suicide.

CHAPTER IV

More Revelations

ALTHOUGH it immediately became known that Teasdale had committed a number of frauds, the full extent of these was not ascertained for some considerable time.

There were two major reasons for this, one being the intricacy of the frauds and the difficulty of determining when they actually began; while the other was the confusion caused by the absconding of the shadowy gentleman. This created difficulties of all kinds, as he had been associated with the firm since the days of Teasdale's father and had an intricate knowledge of all its transactions, but the situation was further complicated by the fact that essential documents had vanished on the day of the willowy gentleman's departure. Before long, it became very clear that the purloined documents were those most indispensable to the task of reducing Teasdale's chaotic affairs to some semblance of order.

When the full extent of the frauds was known, months later, the meetings I had had with Teasdale acquired another background. To review those meetings, knowing Teasdale's actual circumstances at the time, was to realize the extraordinary courage of the man and the power of his will.

For instance, when Teasdale had proposed that I should invest five hundred pounds in some speculation, it had been essential for him to obtain that sum. On that Friday afternoon, when he had turned up so unexpectedly at Meridian Square, he was on the verge of total ruin. He had the best of reasons for knowing this stark fact, but this knowledge did not cause his mask to quiver for a single instant. He had been in no haste to introduce the subject—and had dismissed it with an elegant movement of his hands. At the time, he had convinced me that it had little significance, although he had done everything in his power to ensure my acceptance of his proposal, even to the extent of ascertaining that the bank manager, Quiddle, would grant me an overdraft of five hundred pounds. It had been essential for Teasdale to obtain this sum. So essential that if, soon after our meeting, he had not secured control of the affairs of Rupert's second victim, Teasdale's suicide would have occurred some months before it did. His dilemma, therefore, had been a desperate one, but he had given no hint of it. He had been wholly

self-possessed, completely at ease—and the Voice had been as mellifluous as ever.

The respite gained by Teasdale as a result of obtaining control of the affairs of Rupert's second victim was a very brief one, for the only full solution of Teasdale's appalling predicament was to become master of a fortune. This was the reason why he had been so anxious to become the administrator of Christopher's affairs, even without remuneration to himself. It was his one chance of salvation. Nothing, therefore, could emphasize the effect of Christopher's presence more dramatically than the fact that Teasdale did *not* mention this subject during his interview with Christopher.

When the whole truth about Teasdale eventually became known, every single aspect of the man acquired a new connotation. What people had believed him to be, and what he actually was, resembled each other as little as the face of a tapestry resembles the back.

In retrospect, for instance, it became very evident how efficiently Teasdale had employed all the time-tested devices for deception. His camouflage had been so perfect that no one had doubted that he was what he appeared to be. Every detail was superb, and their composite effect was almost hypnotic.

He had been honorary solicitor to several well-known charities: he had presented a façade of impressive Rectitude; there was no sign of blatant extravagance in his mode of life. He had created enthusiastic confidence in each new victim by handing over a spectacular profit which purported to be the fruit of a fortunate speculation and was, in fact, a small return of the victim's own capital. He was a bachelor, and, to the unthinking, this seeming celibacy suggested a monk-like dedication of his energies to the interests of his clients. There was not a device in the whole repertoire of deception which Teasdale had not employed and exploited to its maximum capacity.

There is this to be said, however, in extenuation of the stupidity of Teasdale's dupes: his appearance would have deceived any one—bar a saint or the devil himself. To ordinary mortals, Teasdale looked like Tradition in its finest and fullest flowering. He seemed to combine the detachment of an aristocrat with the probity of a Victorian. So it is not surprising that, to many, he symbolized all that was most enduring in the national character.

His countless dupes, therefore, had the minor satisfaction of knowing that both nature and art had baited the hook which they had swallowed so confidently.

But even when the full extent of Teasdale's frauds was known, no one seemed able to discover the date on which they had first occurred. It was certain that misappropriation of clients' funds had started

long ago, but how long remained a mystery. A good deal of evidence supported the belief that misappropriation had begun when Teasdale's father was head of the firm and that, therefore, the son had inherited a juggling act which he had to continue, or disappear from the stage.

This possibility seemed a probability when people reviewed the facts about Teasdale's father in retrospect. He had been a hard-living, hard-drinking man, with a passion for hunting and amorous adventures. He had had the temperament of an eighteenth-century country squire and the extravagance which belonged to the type. He had been extremely popular and had revelled in that popularity. His frail, sensitive wife had died young—there had been only one child—and old Teasdale had not married again. There was a legend that he feared nothing and nobody, with the single exception of his son, who, temperamentally, was as remote from him as an iceberg is from a volcano. It was said that the old man could not endure the presence of the brilliantly gifted, cold, contemptuous being who was his only legitimate child.

Be all that as it may, it is certain that the day Harold Teasdale entered the firm, old Teasdale retired and, a few months later, died in the hunting field—leaving even less than had been prophesied by the pessimistic.

But it was some time before people realized the relevance of the facts about old Teasdale, chiefly because most of the Mannerings and Teasdales were far too occupied during the weeks following Harold Teasdale's suicide to indulge in retrospects. They were so occupied, hoping for a miracle, that many of them did not even perceive the full significance of the willowy gentleman's sensational disappearance.

It is true that his abrupt departure created suspicion, but this was soon allayed by the necessity of believing what they hoped. Consequently, most of them were totally unprepared for the emergence of the sinister fact that the willowy gentleman had long known of the misappropriation of clients' funds—and had used this knowledge to blackmail Teasdale.

When *that* fact emerged, naked Consternation ruled supreme.

To me, however, the overwhelming aspect of the whole situation was its irony. Teasdale's favourite theory had been that sooner or later one encounters a more ruthless example of the type to which one belongs. Well, *he* had encountered it—in the willowy gentleman. Yes, that suburban travesty of the eminent Harold Teasdale had been literally the living proof of the lawyer's theory. The willowy gentleman *was* more ruthless and more cunning than his employer—

far more ruthless and far more cunning. It must have been crucifixion to Teasdale's pride to be blackmailed by that distorted shadow of himself which haunted the ENQUIRIES room.

Before this final revelation, however, Teasdale's dupes made discovery after discovery about the man they had trusted so absolutely. Probably the most devastating in its way was that Teasdale's visits to Paris had not been for professional reasons, but to indulge the particular type of sexuality which happened to appeal to him.

These discoveries, however, belonged to the future. All that became known immediately after Teasdale's suicide was that a number of frauds had been committed, and although this naturally caused intense anxiety among his clients, many harboured the fantastic hope that the frauds would prove to be minor ones which would leave most of their capital intact. Ernest Mannering and the parson were the leaders of these optimistic diehards. Buck, on the other hand, assumed the worst and seemed to derive sadistic satisfaction from the sufferings of the others—especially those of Rupert, who ran from one person to another, like a demented ghost, seeking consolation.

But the enigma was Sir Michael.

No word came from him and he refused to speak over the telephone. He did not return to London, and, a few days after Teasdale's death, he moved to another part of the country in order to frustrate the frantic attempts to get into touch with him.

All this was very mysterious. I was excited, therefore, when a wire arrived from Sir Michael, asking me to go to his house the next evening—and to tell no one of his arrival.

CHAPTER V

Sir Michael Takes Stock

ALL DAY it had rained ceaselessly, but towards evening the deluge stopped and a high wind roared through the streets, rattling windows and rocking the drenched trees in the Square. I decided to walk to Sir Michael's and left the house soon after eight-thirty.

The blackness of the night emphasized its sound and fury although, occasionally, the light of a reeling moon momentarily flooded the deserted streets. One of these swift illuminations occurred as I buffeted my way into Mortimer Square, with the result that I had a sudden glimpse of its barrack-like houses and monumental dreariness.

When I reached No. 9, the gaunt edifice was dark as Doomsday and silent as a Trappist monastery, but, although I felt certain that Sir Michael had not returned, I pulled the bell in the hope that things were not what they seemed.

Two minutes later, a light appeared in the hall, the massive door was thrown open, and there was Sir Michael in a dressing-gown, smoking his long-stemmed brier.

We shook hands in silence, then I followed him through the lugubrious hall and up the stairs.

"I've just arrived," he announced as we entered the big oblong room. "Make yourself comfortable. Be with you in a minute."

He disappeared through the communicating door, leaving me free to discover whether there had been any changes since my last visit.

Apart from the presence of a couple of large suitcases and an overcoat, which Sir Michael had evidently thrown over a table on his arrival, the room had not altered. The armchairs and sofa were still ranged near the fire, creating the effect of a room within the room; sporting prints and etchings still adorned the walls; the old china still stood in the elaborate cabinets. And the classics still stood in chaste seclusion in the carved bookcase. The portrait of Sir Michael's first wife—the dark aristocratic woman with the long narrow hands—was still on the wall. Opposite it hung the portrait of his second wife—the Rubenesque blonde—who had died suddenly a few years ago. The two portraits seemed to contemplate each other with friendly, mutual surprise.

I was studying these portraits when Sir Michael called from the next room:

"There isn't any hot milk, so we shall have to have boiling water with our rum. D'you mind?"

"Not in the least."

"Is that fire burning?"

"The logs are just catching."

A moment later, he appeared with two glasses, a kettle, and a bottle of rum under his arm. He put these on a small table, then came over to me.

"Now, Drake! Take a look at me—a good look and a long one."

He gripped the lapels of his dressing-gown, then stood still, challenging inspection.

It seemed to me that the electric old man was more vital than ever. The blue eyes were more fiery, the white hair more vigorous, the Viking quality more pronounced. Even in rock-like repose, there was something dynamic about him—something insurgent—some spring of energy endlessly renewed. To confront this patriarch was to realize the fatuity of tethering a man to the number of his years, as if mere duration dictates a man's destiny. One always thought of Sir Michael as "the old man" because affection prompted the phrase, but he was not old. Years are not the measure of a man's quality. Some men are middle-aged at thirty; some old at forty; and some are senile almost from the cradle. Sir Michael was young—young, because he was resilient, ardent, generous. Death would have power over him once—and only once. It would win by a knock-out—not on points.

"You've had a good look, and now I am going to tell you something, Drake. You are facing the biggest damned fool ever born!"

"I wish you were right."

"I *am* right! I've always sworn that I've had an eye for three things—a horse, a woman, and a man. By God, I was wrong! Didn't I tell you that Teasdale feller was a dead man, bar his brain? And yet I left my affairs in his hands! Everything was in his hands bar Magda's money! I've lost every shilling, like the rest of 'em."

"You think it's as bad as that?"

"Of course it is, Drake. Sit by the fire while I mix the rum, then I'll ask you something."

A moment later, he handed me a glass of rum and boiling water.

"You tell me this," he said as he began to stride up and down the room. "D'you think that Teasdale feller would have killed himself if he hadn't reached the last limit?"

"I doubt it."

"Of course not! There won't be a shilling for any of us—and the sooner those ninnies face that fact the better. This house, and everything in it, has gone. And so has everything else. Teasdale had got down to the last sixpence. That dummy deceived all of us. This is the end of the Mannerings, and a thundering good job too! Most of 'em had come to an end without knowing it. Well—now—they do know it, or they soon will, and then we'll see if there's any stuff left in 'em."

He stopped near me, then asked:

"If I can live on a fiver a week they can change too—can't they? I'll have Magda's money—my sister Magda's money. That's a fiver a week. But if I had not one farthing I would not care one damn. Not one damn, Drake! I'd get a living as a gardener or a carpenter. Or I'd let out hunters."

Almost immediately, he went on:

"When I heard about Teasdale I laughed till I thought I should have died. Taken in by that dummy! And probably taken in by his rogue of a father before him. Still, the old man had his points. I used to hunt with him. But that son of his was a ghost. And he took in all of us. All bar one."

"Who was that?"

"Godfrey Bristowe. Now, Bristowe's not my type. I could never think of a word to say to him. But all his affairs were once in Teasdale's hands, and Bristowe took them away from him."

"Yes, I remember. He told me he did."

"It's years ago but, at the time, I asked him why. And he said it was because he did not like the shape of Teasdale's head and his white womanish hands. I thought Bristowe was cracked. But he wasn't. He had an eye. He'd got a sense of feel, and, by God, if you haven't got that you haven't got anything."

He knocked his pipe out over the blazing logs, then refilled it.

"I feel as if I had just been born, Drake. I'm going to marry—d'you know that?—I'm going to marry Linda. Tell you about that later. I've got to get a son. Once, I wanted a son to inherit the Mannering name and the Mannering property. Well, now, the Mannering name isn't worth much and there isn't any property. So I want a son, not to inherit, but to *create*. To create a new line of Mannerings. And to start from scratch."

Then he added:

"And that's what England's got to do, Drake. Start again from scratch."

He came nearer to me, his eyes ablaze, then shook his great bronzed hand in the air.

"England's got to start from scratch. I'll tell you why. Because England has been in the hands of ninnies for twenty years. *That's* why. And what have the ninnies done for her? Reduced her prestige to nil. *That's* what they've done for her. But before long the common people of England will put her prestige where it belongs. And that's high. By the living God, it's thundering high!"

He shot clenched fists heavenwards, then began to rage up and down the room, emitting growls like a defiant lion.

"The ninnies, Drake, the ninnies! With their Safety First twaddle and their apologetic little voices! These ninnies have had power for years—and a huge majority in the House of Commons. They've had every advantage—birth, privilege, money. And the whole wretched pack of them have been outwitted by three ex-Army corporals!"

"Well, you'll have to account for one thing," I said, "and that is: if the ninnies are so unrepresentative, how did they get into power?"

"I'll soon tell you that. In peace, the Services are ignored and the common people are ignored. The people of England are lied to, flattered, fed on syrup. The people are never told the facts until the facts are so appalling that they can't be concealed. And so, in peace, the people become bored, apathetic, inert. They have no leadership —none! Mediocrity is in power. It's April 1939. Mediocrity has been in power for years—and the last twenty years have been about the rottenest period in England's history."

After the briefest of pauses, he went on with redoubled vehemence:

"A pack of buttoned-up super-clerks, running hat in hand after every blackguard in Europe! That's the type which has pretended to represent England for years! How long is it since you heard a public man speak with a *ring* in his voice? *We* may have been deceived by these gentry, but the gangsters running the rest of Europe were not deceived by them. I tell you, Drake, those mediocrities are just as much a fraud—in a different way—as Harold Teasdale."

He continued to storm up and down the room, developing his indictment with flaming fervour. As I watched him, I realized that he was infinitely more representative of England than the "ninnies," and I also realized that below all the seeming stagnation of England —below all the surface inertia and apathy—there runs, like a raging underground river, a piratical spirit which will throw folly to the winds when confronted by a vital challenge.

This old man with his Elizabethan energy, this buccaneer, who paced the room as if it were the bridge of a ship, was English from crown to sole. His ardour, his individuality, his roaring self-confi-

dence were a million times more English than the negative parish-magazine virtues which have usurped the title.

Perhaps in the deepest sense he was more English to-night than he had ever been, because he had lost practically everything in the Teasdale smash and remained undaunted. For the English—despite their worship of property—have something at the very centre of them which *is* willing to lose the whole world, provided they do find their own souls. But they won't lose the world for anything less than the finding of their own souls—and why should they? "Spirits are not finely touched but to fine issues."

Possibly it was the appearance of this volcanic old man which inclined me to look at him rather than to listen, but, as I watched him striding to and fro, stopping now and then to take a pull at his rum, I understood how enigmatic and how incalculable the English are to foreigners. By all the rules, Sir Michael ought to have been thinking about nothing but himself, for he had lost practically everything. But he was not thinking about himself, and it seemed to me that this creative reaction to his own misfortunes was symbolic of the race to which he belonged; for, in extremity, the real Englishman cares for nothing but the survival of England. Sir Michael had the grimmest reasons for believing that he was ruined, and yet he was raging and roaring up and down the room because the "ninnies" had so reduced England's name that it no longer rang out like the blast of a bugle.

"We've all been fools, Drake! Yes, every damned man-jack of us! We've tried to sleep through an earthquake. We've gone on like a querulous old invalid who only wants to be left alone. But, by God, it's chiefly the fault of the gouty old governesses who have pretended to rule us! They knew the facts, Drake. And they did not tell the people the facts. They lied to them. They told them that cowardly little policies would succeed."

After a brief pause, he thundered on:

"Not long ago I met one of those Cabinet Minister fellers at the club and I asked him why he didn't tell the people of England the facts—and he said they wouldn't stand up to 'em. This political popinjay telling me that the people of England were afraid of the facts! Well, I say again that, when the facts are bad enough, they will have to be told to the people of England. Whenever that happens, the world sees something. It always has—and it always will. Finish your rum! And we'll have another. And we'll drink to England. Drink to her in rum! A pirate toast to a pirate people! Yes, by God, we'll drink to eternal England—who is stirring in her sleep!"

The toast was drunk, then Sir Michael threw his glass into the grate and I threw mine after it.

While he was getting more glasses he explained that, henceforth, he intended to cut his rum down to one tot a day.

"That's all I'll be able to afford, Drake. A tot a day! But that's no reason why we should go short to-night."

He handed me a steaming glass, lit his pipe, then threw himself into an armchair and held out his hand to the blazing logs.

"Now, tell me what they are all saying and doing about this Teasdale business."

I explained that many of them were determined to believe that Teasdale's frauds would prove to be minor ones and that most of their capital would be found intact. He received this information with a shout—said they were ninnies—then asked what those who did not delude themselves were doing.

I told him that, so far as I could make out, Buck had some involved plans regarding Iris, but Sir Michael cut in with the announcement that "Buck will swim whoever sinks." Finally, after discussing a great number of people, Sir Michael asked:

"What about Arthur Mannering? Is he still in America?"

"He's still there. I cabled, telling him about Teasdale's suicide—and I had a cable back two days ago. It told me that he is married, and is leaving for Europe immediately. Also, it reminded me that I have a date with him next month in the Place du Tertre."

"Married? Married that rich young American girl? That feller's a genius—a Mannering genius! No brains—but marvellous instincts! He isn't a man. He's Self-Preservation—in Savile Row clothes. And yet—God knows why—I like him when I'm with him."

"Yes, so do I."

"Married money! Judged it to a split second! I don't care how young and pretty she is, Arthur will never be faithful to her. He'll have an affair with another woman when he's on his honeymoon."

A few minutes later, he rose and began to wander about the room, looking at things.

"I shan't come here again, Drake. It's my last night. When all the facts are known about Teasdale, there won't be a thing in this house which belongs to me. I'm sleeping at the club to-night—and resigning from it to-morrow. I shall marry Linda, and I've told her she's got to have a son. And be pretty quick about it. I've no time to waste. A *son*—no daughters! I'm having no nonsense. I've made that clear to her. We shall live in a cottage in the country."

He paused, then added:

"I remember my grandfather saying, when I was a boy at Selby,

that a man could only live in one of three places: a castle, a cloister, or a cottage. And, by God, he was right! I've taken stock, Drake, and I'm starting again. I've lost damned nearly everything—and I feel freer than I've felt for years. The old life is over. And it's not coming back. It's never coming back."

He came to a standstill by the chimney-piece, then stood with his back to the fire. The suspended vigour of his attitude reminded me of the figurehead of a ship.

"I've been pestered by the family for years, and now none of them will mind what I do. I'll marry Linda, and no one will care tuppence. Do you know why I'm going to marry her?"

"It's your reasons which would interest me."

"Here's some of 'em. She's young, strong—and all her instincts are intact. She's herself. That's rare in a woman nowadays—most of them are echoes. She's receptive and she's capable of development. That's rare too. I took her away from that factory. We've been in the country together. Every one thinks she's my mistress, but that's not true."

He paused, then went on:

"It's time the real people in England got together. Linda is my kind of person, but I'd never have met her if it had not been for Christopher. There's too much isolation in modern England. Every one is shut up in a box with a label on it. I do not care one damn about the class she belongs to. She has my type of blood. And she has the kind of body I like—the kind that will give me a son. Of course people will say that this is the Mannering sensuality coming out again—and it's true enough that, when the Mannerings get old, they always go after young girls. But I'm not old. I've lived a long time, but that's different. Linda comes to town soon. I shall marry her and live in a cottage in the country."

After a silence, he added:

"But I'm in the Mannering tradition in this—I am marrying money."

"How do you make that out?"

"Linda thinks that a fiver a week is a big income. Well, if that's all a man has—and he marries a woman who thinks it's a lot—he's marrying money. Let s have another drink, Drake, and then we'll go."

He mixed the drinks, then I said to him:

"There's one thing I'd like to know. I gather you think you owe Christopher a lot."

"Everything! If it had not been for him, this Teasdale business would have knocked me out."

"Well, could you say just what he means to you?"

"I can tell you what he's done for me. Now, his effect on some people seems to be to turn them into different people, but that's not so with me. I am what I was—but my eyes are open. They are open as they've never been. That's why I see what a fool I've been —and what fools we've all been. But tell me this—where is Christopher?"

"I don't know, but he telephoned this morning to tell me he no longer wants a companion."

"So your job's gone?"

"Yes. I expected this, of course."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'd go to Paris straight away and wait till Arthur Mannering turns up, if it weren't that I've a feeling there is something I have to do first. I don't know what it is yet—so I'm staying on."

"Do you think you'll meet Christopher again?"

"I'm certain. And Rosa too. I'm so certain that I don't mind being separated from them."

"The whole Christopher business, Drake, is a thundering queer one."

"A thundering queer one!"

Sir Michael rose, pulled off his dressing-gown, then exclaimed:

"Give me a hand! I've got to settle what I'm going to take away from here. It can't be much. Open that suitcase, will you? The one with that yellow label."

I opened the suitcase, then he knelt on the floor and folded his dressing-gown expertly. I watched the powerful hands move deftly to and fro.

"Now! Wait one minute!"

He shot into the adjoining room, returning almost immediately with two photographs—one of his mother; the other of Magda.

"This goes with me," he announced, putting the former into the suitcase. Then he stood for some moments looking at the photograph of Magda.

"I say again that the Lord can create beings like Magda, but he doesn't seem to be able to keep them alive. I'm glad that the only money I have is Magda's money. She'll be near me every time I spend a sixpence."

He looked more intently at the photograph, then said:

"You were a very great person, Magda. A very great person, my dear."

He put the photograph into the suitcase, then crossed to the bureau.

"Thank God, my daughter isn't affected by this Teasdale business! She's all right. She's abroad with her soldier husband."

He put her photograph with the others, fastened the suitcase, then put on his coat and overcoat.

For some moments he stood looking round, in the way one does when one is leaving a room for the last time. He glanced at the cabinets, at the print of Selby, at the virgin classics.

"Never had time for books, Drake. But Linda has read a lot. It surprised me what she had read. On winter afternoons, when we've had tea, I shall lie on a sofa, smoke my brier, and get her to read to me. I like her voice. I like the way she moves. And I like to hear her singing to herself when she's alone. I like women, Drake, and I need them. There's something in me which is only at rest when there's a woman about. It makes the scales level."

He looked round the room again.

"Spent quite a bit of time here, one way and another. Things come to an end. They come to an end. And, if you're wise, you let 'em go. I've had a good life—a thundering good life. And I thank God for it."

After a long silence, he said slowly:

"It's an odd thing, but there's something in you which is always alone—and which is never lonely."

Then he turned to me and asked:

"Will you telephone for a taxi?"

"Of course."

When I put the receiver down, I found he was gazing at the portrait of his first wife. For some moments he gazed at the dark aristocratic woman, then turned and studied the portrait of the luxuriant blonde. His expression did not change as he looked from the one to the other. It remained inscrutable.

"I'm not leaving these."

"All right. We'll get them on to the taxi somehow."

"They were painted by good artists, though for the life of me I can't remember the name of either of them."

Again he stood motionless, looking first at one portrait, then at the other.

"I'm not leaving these."

He fetched a pair of steps. He carried one portrait down to the hall and I followed with the other. Then we returned for the suitcases.

When the taxi arrived, we found that the gale had blown itself out. A radiant moon rode high in a triumphant heaven.

We stood at the top of the steps while the taximan attended to the things. When all was ready, Sir Michael banged the front door behind us with a resounding crash.

"That's the end of that."

CHAPTER VI

Gutter-Soul

I

I HAD told Sir Michael that the reason why I did not go to Paris, and wait for Arthur Mannering to arrive, was because I felt I had something to do before leaving London. That was true enough, and it continued to be true for several days, but the nature of this "something" eluded me.

And then, quite suddenly, when I woke one morning, I knew that I had to see Douglas Mannering.

I imagined this would be simple enough, but soon discovered that no one knew what had happened to Douglas, apart from the fact that he had left Iris finally almost immediately after Teasdale's suicide. No one knew—and no one cared. There was not the slightest interest in Douglas, and none in me, for it had now become known that I had ceased to be Christopher's companion. The Mannerings and the Teasdales were far too occupied fanning flickering hopes about the ultimate effect of the Harold Teasdale crash to give a thought to a waster who had disappeared, or to a man who had lost his job.

So the only thing to do was to visit Douglas's haunts, but this did not get me anywhere. All I could find out at The Red Star was that he had not been there for weeks—and that Kitty, the barmaid, had left. I fared no better at The Rat-Hole, where I cross-examined the derelict old waiter, George, only to discover that Mr. Mannering had not been in for a long time and had seemed "in a very bad way" on his last visit.

I scribbled a note for Douglas, asking him to telephone, and gave it to George. Then, just as I was about to go, I said to the old waiter:

"Does he owe you anything?"

"I'm not saying anything about that, sir. Mr. Mannering has always been very good to me—very good indeed, he has."

"How much is it, George?"

It was "a matter of two pound twelve." I made him take the money, then, having been assured that he would deliver the note directly he could, I left The Rat-Hole.

A few days later, Douglas telephoned just as I was leaving the house to go to lunch.

He was so stone sober and his voice was so lifeless that if he had not opened by giving his name, I should not have guessed who it was. He suggested we should meet in a Soho café, if I really wanted to see him, and if I wasn't too particular—as he didn't look too good.

Just before he hung up, there was a hint of the former Douglas in his tone when he said:

"Listen, old man! It was damned good of you to settle up with that poor bastard, George. We had a drink to celebrate. And then I borrowed five bob from him."

I was late for our meeting, as I had the devil of a job finding the café, which was an obscure one at the end of a street not much wider than a passage, but eventually I found it and was hurrying in when someone caught me by the arm. For some moments I stared at an unshaven man in a fourth-hand suit before I recognized Douglas.

The café was the usual cheap Soho affair with some high stools near the counter and a few tables at which foreigners were drinking coffee, or writing letters, or reading French or Italian papers. Most of them were probably waiters, but there were one or two enigmatic ones, better dressed than the others, who might have been anything except law-abiding citizens. Only coffee and cakes were to be had, and there was a continuous coming and going of customers.

We found an empty table in a corner, and I could see from the way in which Douglas slumped into his chair that he was physically exhausted. Also, every now and again he would look round with a startled expression, as if he could not make out what he was doing in this place—or as if he were not quite certain that he was really in it.

He began to tell me about himself, but, in one way, these details were unnecessary, because his appearance told you everything. At least, it told me everything. Perhaps I had better make clear why that was so.

If you have lived for years, as I have, not far removed from the frontier of poverty, you recognize the signs branded on those who have crossed that frontier. You know them so well that it gives you an odd sensation to have only a table between you and an inhabitant of that populous region. It reminds you just how near you are to it.

It is said that there are jungles in South America which if a man penetrates only a few feet—and then loses his sense of direction—he is not seen again. Poverty is just such a jungle, and although Douglas had gone only a short way into it, I fancy he had seen

enough to scare him. Seen enough, maybe, to make him lose his sense of direction.

He was telling me that he had been "kicked out" by Iris—that he had pawned all his things—but if he had not revealed a single fact I should have known that he had left the land of the living for the land where people just manage to exist.

Any one could see that he was already enmeshed in a network of petty lies and petty stratagems, for, although he went on talking, it was obvious that his essential thoughts were intent on his own desperate affairs. Sometimes he would stop in the middle of a sentence, produce a grimy piece of paper, scribble a note on it—then look round the café with haggard eyes in order to make certain that someone was not there. Already, the future had ceased to exist for him. Poverty knows only the Now. Already, all his former exuberances had vanished: he no longer spoke with animation, or gave his great shouting laugh. Instinctively, he conserved what energy he had, because he did not know when a new and a desperate demand would be made on it.

It was impossible to believe that this was the man who had once been aflame with jealousy.

"You say that Iris kicked you out?"

"Naturally! What do you think? She doesn't know whether she will have a bob when all the Teasdale beans are spilled, so she was likely to go on keeping me—specially when I persuaded her to put her affairs into Teasdale's hands, and got him to break her marriage settlement! Of course she kicked me out!"

Then he added:

"Things burn themselves out in time—and I'm burnt out on Iris. It doesn't matter a damn to me what she does."

"And what do you think she will do?"

"What Buck tells her. He's got it all worked out. Iris's father will probably make her an allowance, provided she leaves England—and breaks all contact with the kids. That's Buck's plan, and it will probably come off. Buck will go abroad with her. And live on her."

"What about Ethel?"

"She's trying to convince Pimple that she's an innocent, wronged, wretched little woman."

"Pimple's that military-looking man, isn't he?"

"That's the one. Ethel's wasting her time. Pimple is one of those bachelors who kid themselves that they are going to marry one day. He's been kidding himself for thirty years. He'll never marry. He fell in love with himself when he was in the cradle and has been

faithful ever since. Ethel's done for. Ernest has cut her allowance to two quid a week. Soon, it will be nothing. Then she'll join the Drewson racket."

"And—Ernest?"

"He'll prowl about back yards till he finds an old maid who'll give him a saucer of milk."

The tone in which he discussed these people made it perfectly plain that he had not a glimmer of interest in any one of them. Nothing existed for him but the gnawing knowledge of his own predicament—and the hope of sudden deliverance. He could not keep still for a single second and he kept glancing furtively at me, instantly averting his eyes directly there was the least likelihood of their glance meeting mine.

It's an odd sensation to be with a man who has nothing. I knew there was not one farthing in the pockets of that seedy suit of his, and I knew, therefore, that his thoughts must be a writhing knot of stratagems relating to rent, creditors, and the next meal.

I had put my cigarette case on the table and, when he had finished wolfing buns and drinking coffee, he smoked one cigarette after another, gazing straight ahead of him with the intensity of a man confronted by a ghost.

After a long silence, he exclaimed involuntarily:

"It's Kitty, damn it!"

"Kitty!"

"Yes—that barmaid at The Red Star."

"What's she to do with anything?"

"Everything!"

He plunged into a long and more or less coherent account of his relations with Kitty, from which I learned that she had been his mistress for some time—that she was ill and had lost her job—and that she was going to have a child. He had found a room for her and they were living together.

When he reached this point he exclaimed:

"Listen, old boy! For Christ's sake, don't think she is like me, because she isn't. She was absolutely all right till I turned up. It's a damned odd thing that a man with no will-power has a hell of an attraction for some women. Particularly the maternal type. They fall for him—flat! I tell you she was absolutely all right till I turned up! Straight as a ruler! Got her life all set. She wasn't going to stay a barmaid. She was saving. She was going to save two hundred quid, then go into business with her uncle. He's got a shop and is doing pretty well, but wants more money in the show. So Kitty was all set—all fixed. Then I turn up and bitch everything! I can't

do a thing for her. And I can't leave her. I've tried, but I can't. Even I can't do that."

Then he added:

"I swear by God and all his angels that I didn't mean to tell you a word of all this. I didn't come to see you because I knew that, if I did, I should tell you everything. But I can't talk about anything else. She lies in that damned awful bed, in that bloody awful room, looking as if she can't believe what's happened to her!"

Almost immediately, he went on:

"Listen, old boy! You've been damned good to me in the past, but I wonder if there's just one more thing you would do."

"What's that?"

"Come and see her. Just come and see her. It would show her that I do know someone who isn't on the kerbstone or in the gutter."

"All right. I'll see her."

"You will?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"Now—if you like."

He shot to his feet.

"Come on! Let's go. Let's go now!"

Two minutes later, we left the café.

II

First we took a bus, then a tram, and then walked down street after street, flanked by moribund shops or palsied houses. On and on we went, and I felt we might go on for ever, because the tentacles of squalor stretched endlessly in every direction. I do not know the name of the district, and it certainly does not matter, for it is just a bad joke that such a district has a name. It should have a number.

Everything gaped for gain—shops, public-houses, movie theatres. Everything stank of the need for money. Everything existed to take toll of necessity. But the worst aspect of this drab inferno was that no one realized it was hell, with the result that every one and everything was slowly rotting without being aware of it. Such districts are worse than slums, because a slum is known for what it is.

On and on we went till we branched into a pandemonium of back streets, emerging eventually into one behind a factory.

Long, long ago the houses had evidently been the genteel homes

of middle-class families, but no youthful memories brightened their sinister widowhood. Memories are related to hope—and do not survive it. These houses awaited demolition, as the aged and infirm wait for death, knowing that it was the one remaining event which could happen to them. Every other humiliation had been endured ages ago. So there they stood, spectres of peeling stucco, as grim as the lives which infested them.

Douglas had not spoken for the last half-hour, but when we were half-way down the street he stopped, looked round, then said:

"There's something damned odd happening nowadays."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing seems real. Look at this hole! There it is—there's no damned doubt about that. You can see it, hear it, smell it. And yet it's more like a lousy dream than anything else. If the whole outfit disappeared overnight, it wouldn't surprise me. I bet hell's just like that. That's why it's hell."

We walked on for about twenty yards, then stopped at a house differing in no essential from those either side of it. Douglas produced a latch-key, then changed his mind and pulled the bell.

A jangle resounded in the lugubrious basement. Some minutes later, the door was opened by the landlady.

"Sorry! I forgot the key. I've brought a friend to see my wife."

I was duly inspected.

Douglas had evidently decided that as I was wearing a good suit of clothes it would be a shrewd psychological move to exhibit me to the landlady. My appearance might serve to hold up his tottering credit for a day or two longer. It would prove that he had a friend who at any rate did not look as if he were a foot from the gutter. She might be impressed and, actually, she *was* impressed. Probably she wanted to be. Hope frequently builds a skyscraper on the flimsiest foundations.

Landladies of this kind of house are usually either the hard, dominating male type—or the perpetually frightened feminine type. Douglas's landlady belonged to the latter category, which, if goaded to extremity, is capable of more ruthless action than the virago variety. One barks like a dog, but the other springs like a cat.

This woman in her drab dress, which hung with a loose anonymous air, might have been any age between forty-five and sixty-five. She *might* have been thirty-five—but I hope not. She had the ghost of good looks to such an alarming degree that she seemed to be haunting the ruin of her own body. Everything about her had shrunk and faded, but, nevertheless, there were hints of departed glories. The puckered skin pathetically suggested a vanquished plumpness—the

wizened features a former roundness. These hints, which were the rearguard actions of defeated youth, would be overwhelmed in a few years, and then disaster would celebrate its final triumph. Meanwhile, her hair had a posthumous attraction, and her bony figure a remnant of grace.

She was looking up at me, her head to one side, with eyes which were archives of grim experience. Those eyes had one passion and one fear. The passion was—rent; the fear—trickery. But what I found chiefly remarkable was the contrast between the unnaturally bright eyes and the apathy of the features. It seemed to me that, one way and another, this woman's face was a psychological map of the district in which she lived.

Eventually her expression made it clear that she approved of my presence, partly because of my clothes and partly because I was a new factor in a situation which she regarded with ever-increasing suspicion. So I was welcome. I might be deliverance. I might be The Rent.

I was asked to "Come this way," with the result that I became enveloped by the unique smell which pervaded the house—a smell that was not an individual one, but an anthology. We stood for some moments at the end of the narrow passage near the foot of the stairs, while the landlady gave Douglas a melancholy diagnosis of his "wife's" condition—leaving me free to study my surroundings.

They were very much what I had expected. The light was dim, and you knew that if the sun had been raging in an azure sky it would not have made a lot of difference. Everything had a hostile air, as if it resented the recurring degradation of daily existence. The door handles, the banisters, the remains of the stair carpet seemed to proclaim that they had had enough of it long ago and would rather be anywhere than here.

At this point, however, an altercation suddenly flared up between Douglas and his companion. The theme of contention related to food, for the landlady announced with falsetto indignation that "she wasn't going to give no meals on credit." She followed this declaration by a precise statement of the amount already due to her.

Douglas instantly adopted a policy of abject appeasement, with the customary result, for the landlady retired towards the basement —emitting high-pitched belligerent threats.

"God!" Douglas exclaimed. "Now she'll start something."

He hesitated for some moments, as if undecided whether to follow the irate landlady into the underworld, but eventually he turned and we began to ascend the stairs together.

Although everything was static enough on the surface, the atmo-

sphere of the whole house suggested intense hidden activities. You felt that anything might happen at any moment. You sensed plots and mute antagonisms behind the closed doors of the silent rooms. One of these doors opened a few inches on our approach, but closed noiselessly before we reached it. As we continued to ascend, the stairs became steeper and there was no longer the pretence of a stair carpet.

On arriving at the top floor, Douglas opened a door and we entered a low-pitched room with a sloping ceiling. Kitty was in bed and Douglas went over to her, then began a jerky explanation to the effect that although nothing new had actually turned up, everything would be all right—and that he had brought Mr. Drake to see her. Kitty, however, was too overwhelmed by the news that there was still no definite sign of deliverance to take any interest in Mr. Drake. She continued to stare at Douglas with an expression which was an even blend of consternation and bewilderment. So I had a look round, without deriving much pleasure from the experience.

Two ghostly strips of carpet; an ancient brass bedstead; a wardrobe like a cheap up-ended coffin; an arthritic chest of drawers. Every one of them loathed humanity with a mute, impotent loathing. Every one of them literally ached with a long martyrdom of callous use.

Kitty was a rather full-blown blonde, and as I looked at her I remembered how Iris had once taunted Douglas with the gibe that he always chose barmaids who resembled her. There *was* a resemblance between them. If Necessity had stood by Iris's cradle—if Necessity had pitchforked her into the world and had continued to prod her month after month—Iris might have been like the woman lying in that bed. Had Iris been hardened by hardship, and coarsened physically by privation, she would have been very like this barmaid.

You had only to look at Kitty in order to know that this was probably the first illness she had had for years. Normally, she was strong enough. There was strength in every line of the full, firm face; in the curve of the magnificent shoulders; in the broad, capable hands. I believe that any one seeing these two in this setting—and noting the bewildered expression in Kitty's eyes as she listened to Douglas—would have guessed that she was ill only because this man had jerked her from her familiar environment into an utterly fantastic one. His weakness had hypnotized her strength, and, when she awoke from her trance, she found herself in a spectral region without signposts or boundaries.

These theories came to an abrupt end, however, for Douglas sud-

denly produced two or three buns from his pocket and gave them to Kitty. This action not only gave significance to the row he had had with the landlady about a meal, but it also told me that Kitty had not had any food for some time.

I went over to Douglas and gave him some money.

"You'd better go and buy some food."

He stared at the money for a moment, then said:

"It's damned good of you, old boy. But I doubt if that bitch will cook a meal even if I buy the food."

"She'll do it all right. Tell her I'll see her before I go."

A moment later he went out, leaving me standing at the foot of the bed.

Kitty looked at me for a minute, then altered her position wearily, as if she did not expect much benefit from the change.

"Listen!" I said at last. "I've heard some of the story from Douglas, and—having seen you—I can guess the rest. You won't be able to stay here much longer. That's certain. Any one can see the storm signal on that woman downstairs. So what I want to know is this: Have *you* any plans of any kind? I know he hasn't."

She did not reply immediately, but gazed at me steadily with deep, serious eyes. It was quite clear that I represented a new problem. Here was a man, wearing good clothes, with money to spare, who had appeared as mysteriously as if he had fallen through the roof. Kitty had had many surprises in the chaotic region to which Douglas had brought her, but I was very different from those she had already encountered.

"I haven't any plans," she said at last. "I've made a fool of myself and must pay for it. It's my fault, not his. There's only one thing about him I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Why he doesn't walk out on me. I can't understand that. Most men would."

She had a deep voice and she spoke about herself as impersonally as if she were discussing an empty packing-case. She had no self-pity, because the issue was a clear one. She had made a fool of herself and, in her world, you could not make a fool of yourself without incurring instant penalties. Those were the rules and she did not expect them to be altered for her. She accepted the results of her own folly with the humility with which she had accepted misfortunes not of her own making. Here she was in this filthy room—ill, pregnant, penniless—and it just did not occur to her to blame Douglas.

When I pointed this out, I discovered that Douglas represented

a unique category in her outlook. He was a "gentleman," and, to Kitty, that removed him from the sphere of judgment. Not that she was blind to his faults. On the contrary, she saw them with remarkable clarity and enumerated them concisely, but in a manner which showed that she regarded them as the attributes of the strange species known as "gentlemen"—to whom her own standards were wholly irrelevant. He was weak—he drank—he did no work—he had never worked. All these were proofs, to Kitty, that he was a gentleman—because they showed conclusively how remote he was from her sphere. Also, and above all, he had "stuck" to her. He had not walked out on her. Men frequently "do walk out on a girl if she gets into trouble." Douglas hadn't done that—and this fact made such an overwhelming impression that it did not occur to Kitty to ask the precise advantages which she had derived from his fidelity.

"I'd be on the streets, if it wasn't for him," she announced in a deep tone which seemed to bring the wretched room to life. "Yes, on the streets! Like the woman who has that big room in the basement."

"So a street-woman has a room in the basement?"

"Yes. It's handy, because of them steps down into the area. The landlady don't admit that the woman's on the streets. She gets wild if any one suggests it. But that doesn't stop her charging the woman three times the usual rent for the room."

"I see. What a very English arrangement!"

She went on to tell me about the various inmates of the house and their relations with the landlady, but the more details she gave the clearer it became that all this was alien and frightening to her. Kitty had known only respectable poverty, honest squalor, in which people worked hard and knew the nature of their neighbours' jobs. But this house was very different, and she sensed that some of its lodgers might be known to the police—and this disturbed Kitty profoundly. She was all for law and order, although she had not derived inordinate benefits from either.

It was also clear that it hurt her self-respect to live in the same house with a prostitute. Kitty half-admired the landlady for refusing to recognize the woman's profession, and I am certain Kitty was grateful that she always referred to her as Mrs. Mannering. But these were minor consolations. The possibility that this might become *her* world terrified Kitty, so it was fortunate that she did not associate it with Douglas. To her, it was a nightmare which she happened to be sharing with him.

"Listen!" I said when she stopped speaking. "He'll be back

in a minute and there's some things I've got to say—and say them quickly. You know he's married and has children—and you know he's left his wife for good. It's possible she'll divorce him. Her father might put up the money, but I don't know. What I do know is that if anything is ever to be made of him, you'll have to do it."

She tried to speak, but I stopped her.

"Better just listen. We haven't long. He can't do anything for you—or anything for himself. His temperament makes him hopelessly at odds with everything. He's permanently at war with himself. But *you* are capable. Any one can see that. Given a chance, you'd hold your own. You've done it for years—and you'll do it again."

She made a vigorous movement, then said in a clear, positive tone:

"Of course I can hold my own! But what can I do lying here—knowing I'm going to have a child and that we haven't a penny? If I were well, I'd get a job to-morrow. We've spent our savings, so it's no use going to my uncle. He wants someone with some money who'll work hard in the business. So what can I do except lie here and worry?"

"Listen! You stop worrying. Have the child—and get well. Now, he'll be back in a minute, so I'm going to make this short. I'll pay the rent. I'll keep you till you're up and about. And I'll see that uncle of yours. If he seems straight to me, I'll loan you the two hundred to go into business with him."

She looked such a study in astonishment that I laughed.

"I'm not risking much, Kitty. You're the type who pays back. It's written all over you. And, anyway, money is the easiest thing to give—if you've got it. Which is one reason why charities flourish. But will your uncle mind you living with a man who he will regard as totally useless?"

"He'll care only about the two hundred pounds and my working hard. But——"

"There aren't any buts. I shall give *you* the money—not Douglas. I can hear him coming! Now, no more worry. I'll settle the rent before I go."

I went out quickly—to find Douglas on the floor below.

"I'm settling the rent," I said to him, "and then I'm off. You might come down to the street and show me the best way to the West End."

"You're settling the—*rent*?"

"Yes. You can't go on like this. I've told Kitty. You can have a talk with her when you get back."

We found the landlady at the bottom of the stairs. I fancy she was frequently at the bottom of the stairs when any one went out.

I gave her the amount due—plus three weeks' rent in advance—with the result that a transformed woman came to the front door to see us off.

"I'll see that Mrs. Mannering has all she wants. Never you fear!"

We walked down the street in silence—Douglas in a kind of bewildered ecstasy, and I knowing that there was now no reason why I should not leave for Paris in a few days.

"Look here, old boy!" he exclaimed at last. "Damn it all, why the hell should you do all this for me?"

"Let's skip it. I had a hunch I had to do this—and that's all there is to it. Now, which is the best way from here?"

He told me the shortest route, then, just as I was about to leave him, he said:

"Tell you something—something damned odd! Some months ago—God knows when—I go into The Red Star. New barmaid—Kitty! I say to her: 'I like you.' *She* says: 'You're not so bad yourself.' Well, what the hell is there in that? Nothing! And—now—she's in that room! She's going to have a kid by me! *That's* what's happened. I can't make it out. I can't make head or tail of life, old boy. It's a mystery—a frightful mystery. And, underneath, we're all terrified of it."

CHAPTER VII

Good-bye to Meridian Square

My trunks had gone to the station: the daily woman had just shut the front door behind her for the last time: in half an hour I should leave the house—and never return to it.

Everything seemed remarkably still as I stood in the hall, feeling like a shadow surrounded by memories. Not a sound came from the street and a new silence haunted the rooms, but everything does seem queer when you are looking round for the last time, and I may have been particularly sensitive on this occasion because I had spent the last few days alone.

It was amusing to remember how abruptly every one had dropped me directly it became known that I had ceased to be Christopher's companion. For months I had been the centre of many schemes, but now I was of no more account than the Vincent Drake who, a year ago, had been sitting at a café table in the Place du Tertre with ten pounds in the whole wide world. Very understandable, of course, because Hope is a chameleon and—since Harold Teasdale's suicide—the hopes of the Mannerings had become a very different colour. So different that what was hope to-day would have seemed despair a month ago. The best the Mannerings could now imagine was that they would not find themselves totally ruined when the full extent of the Teasdale frauds became known.

It was strange to stand in the hall, knowing that I should soon shut the front door behind me and never enter the house again. I remembered the first time I had come into this hall with Godfrey Bristowe. I remembered the exact tone of his voice when he had said: "I refuse to show you the dining-room, because it's a total failure. Even the cat refuses to eat in it."

Then, in regular and rhythmic succession, like waves approaching the beach, memory after memory rose before me.

I saw Rosa as I had seen her for the first time, coming into the garden, carrying a small tray. I saw the exact movement she had made when she reached the table and said:

"It's so hot I thought you might like these fruit drinks."

Then Christopher rose before me. He was standing in the Yellow

Room, looking down into the garden, and again I felt that I was gazing at the body of a god.

Then—Belinda. I seemed to see the wraith-like figure, the little fluttering movements, the almost Victorian clothes—the virginal air which made her seem like a girl who had aged, rather than a woman with short silver hair who would soon be sixty. I heard the deep, appealing tone in her voice when she had said:

"How kind you are. . . . I do not know why you, a stranger, should be so good to me. It's dreadful to have no one to whom to go. To wake in the night and not to be able to think of any one!"

Then I seemed to re-live that September afternoon on which I had returned unexpectedly to Meridian Square and had found letters in disorder on my desk. Almost immediately I had heard a movement in Christopher's room, and, soon after, the door opened stealthily and Rupert had appeared. Every detail of our conversation came back to me, and again I seemed to see the haggard eyes, the immaturity of the bird-like features, the narrow pointed chin.

Memory after memory rose before me till, finally, I saw Harold Teasdale as I had seen him after his first and last meeting with Christopher. I seemed to stand looking down on him as he sat in that armchair facing the light.

When this long procession of memories came to an end, sentence after sentence from all the many conversations I had had with Rosa and Christopher trooped through my mind till the sound of their voices seemed to echo in the empty house, compelling me to realize the nature of the miracle which this man and this woman had wrought in my life. I realized, too, how little my physical separation from them had involved, for, in a manner beyond my understanding, I had not been separated from them—and could never be separated from them.

At last I put on my hat and coat, looked round for the last time—and shut the front door behind me. I stood for some moments gazing at the plane tree opposite the house, then hurried down the steps and began to walk rapidly towards Hyde Park Corner. I had one call to make before I went to Victoria to catch the boat train.

I had to see Mr. Quiddle. Yes, Mr. Quiddle, the bank manager, who had unrolled himself like a strip of red carpet before my Importance when I had made his acquaintance a year ago. I had to tell him that I had decided to close my account and that it was necessary to draw the balance in cash. Very necessary! I had lent Kitty two hundred pounds and, when that sum had been added to my many small loans to Douglas—and to the fifty pounds I had given to Helen—it left little out of the five hundred pounds I had received as salary

during the year I had been Christopher's companion. In fact, after I had paid my fare to Paris, I should have about ten pounds. So, financially, I had returned to the position in which I had found myself when I was sitting at that café in the Place du Tertre.

My reception at the bank was very different from that of a year ago. In the first place, there was some difficulty about seeing Mr. Quiddle. I was told that the manager was engaged on important affairs but that, if I would wait, he would try to spare me a minute. So I was shown into a box-like waiting-room in which I found a battered-looking individual who kept checking and re-checking a formidable array of figures on the back of a large envelope, punctuating this activity by exclaiming "Damn!" at intervals, in a tone which became progressively emphatic.

As the minutes passed I recognised that I had become a nobody again—one of the vast anonymous herd who, whether they serve or not, certainly stand and wait. I was no longer Christopher's companion, so I meant nothing to Mr. Quiddle, or to the Mannerings, or to the Teasdales. I no longer represented power. I represented only myself.

Eventually I was ushered into the manager's sanctum, where I found a much-aged Mr. Quiddle. I discovered, later, that he was deeply involved in the Harold Teasdale smash, owing to the fact that he had given the lawyer considerable overdraft facilities on the flimsiest security. Consequently Mr. Quiddle was now being subjected by his Head Office to a form of torture compared with which Third Degree methods are no more than a love-pat.

Mr. Quiddle dismissed the statement that I wished to close my account and draw the balance in cash with a gesture which implied that he was concerned with matters of cosmic importance and could not therefore contemplate trivialities for a single second. So, having said what I had come to say, I was about to go when he asked abruptly:

"You knew Teasdale pretty well, didn't you?"

"Yes. Pretty well."

"Then you'll agree that he had high standards. I mean," he went on more quickly, "it's abominable that some people are determined to believe the worst. Abominable! Things will turn out much better than these people imagine." Then he added: "You think so, don't you?"

There was such urgency in the tone that I dared not tell him what I really thought.

"Every one always believed that he had high standards and——"

"Yes, yes! It will be all right—it will be perfectly all right."

He passed his hand across his forehead, gave a whistling sigh, then his telephone bell rang and I left him.

Three hours later, I was on the boat in Dover harbour.

CHAPTER VIII

Another Channel Crossing

It was a day of sudden sunshine, but the mist deepened after each brief illumination and one knew that, when darkness came, it would conquer with a stride. There were a good many people on the boat and, just before we sailed, I strolled round the deck in order to have a look at my fellow-travellers, some of whom were staring glumly at newspapers, while others were talking excitedly. The remainder were solitary individuals who were gazing at the sea, or the white cliffs, or the circling gulls. I passed one group consisting of people who, normally, would be incapable of discussing anything but their own affairs and overheard the words "Prague" . . . "Danzig" . . . "Poland" emerge from the general chatter.

A minute later, I passed a tall, fair man who was saying to his companion:

"I'll be glad when the whole thing blows up. We can't go on like this. Damn it all, you can't live perpetually in a state of mental and emotional chaos!"

Every minute the mist seemed to get denser but, just before we sailed, the sunlight suddenly blazed out and suffused the white cliffs. This yellow radiance was so swift and so totally unexpected that it had the effect of limelight on a painted scene. I was still gazing at these theatrically-lit cliffs when the boat made her way out of the harbour into the open sea.

Then, as the ship began to yield to the rhythm of the waves, I made a discovery and one which would have been alarming to most people. I discovered that I had lost my memory. That is to say, I could remember little of the life I had lived before my meeting with Arthur Mannering in the Place du Tertre a year ago. My life before that meeting no longer seemed to be anything to do with me. I recognized it no more than one recognizes a garden which is so overgrown that all trace of its original design has vanished, but it is not easy to suggest the exaltation I experienced as a result of this discovery. I felt like a diver must feel when he returns to the sunlight—has his equipment removed—and forgets the vast irrelevance of his experiences in the dark depths of the sea.

I was still luxuriating in this feeling of liberation when I heard someone say:

"You're like me. I always watch the cliffs of Dover till they are out of sight."

I turned round to find the tall, fair man—who had said he would be glad "when the whole thing blows up"—standing by me. He was about thirty, athletically built, with deep-set blue eyes.

"The fellow I'm with," he went on, in the same careless half-humorous tone, "has gone to drink brandy and dry ginger. Says it stops him being ill. Had the nerve to say that to me, when he drinks nothing else ashore. So I've left him to it. I only went below to get a cap."

He looked at me intently, then added:

"You've been about a bit, haven't you?"

"Yes, one way and another."

He gave me a cigarette and we smoked in silence for a minute or two, then I said:

"It's rather odd you spoke to me because, just before we sailed, I heard you say to the fellow you were with that we can't live perpetually in a state of mental and emotional chaos."

He laughed, then said:

"Must have got that from some book. All the same, it's true enough. Doesn't matter a damn to me because I'm only twenty-nine, so I've never known anything approaching stability, but it means a devil of a lot to my father, who is nearly sixty, and who feels as if he is wide awake in a non-stop nightmare."

He broke off to watch a passing sailing boat, then went on:

"Anyway, the whole thing *will* blow up soon and, personally, I'll be glad."

"Why?"

"Well, when things have got into a big enough mess, you welcome action just because it *is* action. You get so sick of chat—so tired of these stupid old men with their tombstone faces and their silly talk about ideals. You've only to look at them to know what their actual values are. War may be damned awful, but modern peace isn't exactly a picnic. I'd rather be in a bayonet charge with some good fellows than alone without a bean—looking for a job. At any rate war gives you something to do. It gives the day a shape. And, if it lasts long enough, it gets rid of the old dodderers. I was telling George all this, just before he disappeared to drink brandy and dry ginger, and he said it was despair."

He laughed good-naturedly—threw his cigarette into the sea—then went on:

"I'll put it this way. The only thing I happen to care about is sailing. Well, if there's war, I'll get some sort of sea-patrol job. That seems much more worth-while to me than the job I've got in my uncle's rapidly diminishing business. What the devil's the good of thinking about the future? You live *now*—or not at all. The world's got to the end of something—and that's all there is to it. So what I want is action—action for its own sake."

The mist was now so dense that you could see only a few hundred yards and, as the movement of the boat had become more pronounced, many of the passengers had gone below.

"It's a year since I crossed the Channel," I said after a long silence. "People thought then that the news they were reading in the papers was pretty grim, but it was like a bulletin from the kingdom of heaven compared with the news they're reading now."

"That's true enough. You can take it from me that there are plenty who are so fed up with everything that they want a showdown—and want it soon."

He lit a cigarette and neither spoke for some minutes. We stood, almost touching, watching the heaving waste of the sea under its vast aura of mist.

At last I said:

"You mentioned the future just now. Well, if there's going to be one, we've got to become different people. Humanity has to find another road—because humanity has come to a dead-stop at the end of a cul-de-sac."

"God Almighty, my dear fellow, you don't mean to tell me that you think people are going to *alter*?"

"Alter or perish. Alter—or be destroyed by the machines. And the more impossible things become, the more people will alter. The more they discover that the old words don't mean a thing—and the more they discover that all the old methods have collapsed—the more they will want a different way of life. And when enough people want a different way of life, they will get it. And not before. Chatter about ideals won't bring it."

Then I added:

"We are dupes of a commercial system which hypnotizes us into believing that we must have all sorts of rubbish that we don't want. The whole outfit has become totally unreal. The news to-day isn't in the newspapers—it's in the faces of the people reading them."

"You may be right," he said, "but I can't wait for miracles. I want something to *do*. I don't care a lot what it is so long as there's excitement and danger. I don't mind tuppence if I get killed. I'd rather be dead than bored."

He laughed, then said:

"Anyway, I don't want to think—it's not in my line. I want to act. The young get a chance in war—and only in war. In peace, England is run by old men—and they've certainly made a damned fine job of it. Mess, muddle, and mediocrity—that's the new trinity. But to hell with all that! Let's go and have a drink."

Ten minutes later, we entered Calais harbour.

CHAPTER IX

Place du Tertre: May 1939

AGAIN I was sitting at a table outside a café in the Place du Tertre with ten pounds in the world—just as I had done a year ago. Then, however, I had had no thought of Arthur Mannering and, now, I was waiting for him.

By a coincidence, it was another misty May morning of tremulous sunshine and flickering shadows. A magical morning! It was pleasant to breathe the fragrance of the blossoming acacias and to watch the mellow old houses emerge from the thinning mist till the coloured awnings of the cafés, and the gay umbrellas over the tables in the Square, began to glow in the ripening sunshine.

Everything was just as it had been a year ago. An artist was working a few yards from my table: American tourists wandered about inspecting old print shops: empty crates were piled high on the pavement outside the café on the corner. The dusty pebbles of the old Square still reminded one of a beach unvisited by the tide, and the shadows on the steep, narrow, cobbled street, which is dwarfed and dominated by the great dome of the Sacré Cœur, seemed identical with those of a year ago.

I had been sitting at the table for about half an hour when I looked up and saw Arthur Mannering sauntering towards me. He held his black soft hat in his hand and stopped more than once to look at a woman or a shop which awakened his interest. As I watched him approach in this leisurely fashion, I marvelled at the extent to which everything about him—every movement, every attitude—proclaimed the kind of person he was. If ever a man revealed himself, and seemed to revel in revealing himself, it was Arthur Mannering.

"Well, here we are," he said when he reached the table and stood looking down at me.

For some moments I gazed up at him, noting the quiet elegance of his clothes and the air of well-being which radiated from him. Nevertheless, I felt that he wanted me to know from the outset that he was quite unperturbed by the catastrophe which had overwhelmed his family. If this were his intention, he certainly succeeded in making me aware of it, because he looked so debonair, so radiantly at home with the world, so self-assured and so self-sufficient that I burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but in one way you are the one survivor of the Mannerings and that suddenly seemed very funny to me."

"I've flair, my dear fellow, that's why I've survived. Other gifts are no good without flair—and, if you've flair, you don't need other gifts."

He sat down, put his hat and stick on the table, then went on:

"The trouble with the Mannerings is that they either think too much, or drink too much, or worry too much. Or their inner lives are so confoundedly complicated that they are eternally trying to adjust themselves to the outside world. The result is that they've no flair. You've got to be free to have flair. It's God's gift to the lazy. But never mind all that! It's jolly to be here again—awfully jolly!"

The schoolboy phrase was characteristic, but his sensuous delight in the scene was so genuine that he certainly made me feel that it was a privilege to be in the Place du Tertre.

He beckoned a waiter, ordered some drinks, then said in the same lazy tone:

"We won't have a post-mortem on the Mannerings. And you won't expect me to be melodramatic about the crash. Why should I be? It's been *sauve qui peut* for me since the cradle, so I am not likely to be sentimental about the family. Incidentally, I hope you haven't told them that I've married a rich American girl and am in Europe."

"You don't have to worry about that. Most of them are far too busy trying to hope they are not totally ruined to have time to think about you."

"Good! Nothing lasts for ever, so the Mannering régime—and everything it stands for—was bound to crash some time. Anyway, we'll skip the post-mortem."

"That suits me, but there are one or two things about you I would like to know."

"Go ahead."

"Here's the first. A year ago you told me you were afraid of marrying that American girl. By the way, I suppose it is the same one you've married? The one under twenty?"

"Certainly it is. But—be fair—she's over twenty now. Which makes it a little more decent."

"You were afraid," I went on, "because you said that, if you married her, you'd know that the desire for easy living was the deepest thing in you."

"You've a terrifying memory."

"I've kept a journal for the last year. I started it precisely a year ago to-day. And I shall make my last entry in it to-night."

"You're a queer person, Drake. You always were. But do tell me what else I was afraid of, because I've entirely forgotten."

"Well, here's something else you were disturbed about. You said that if you married this girl who was under twenty, you'd be haunted by the fact that the Mannering sexuality had emerged in you before it was due. You said that seventy was the traditional age—that it comes with the gout, and goes only with death."

"This is simply terrifying, Drake! It's like having a chat with the Recording Angel. Did I really say all that? Well, in the end, of course, I married on impulse. Evidently I had a feeling there was going to be a crash at home—so I called in the New World to redress the balance of the Old. I believe that is the phrase. Anyway, here are the drinks."

Directly the waiter had disappeared, I asked:

"Is your wife with you in Paris?"

"No. She's staying with relatives in Lyons. She'll probably turn up in a few days. But do tell me this. Did you let Sir Michael know that I had married this American girl?"

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

"Several things. One was that you would never be faithful to her—that you would have an affair with another woman while you were on your honeymoon."

"Did he really say that? How amusing of him!"

Then he added reminiscently:

"One's got to admit that there's a prophetic strain in the old man."

A moment later, he asked:

"Will he have any money at all?"

I explained that Sir Michael would have Magda's money—and that he was going to marry a young factory girl.

"Not really, Drake? The old man is a genius! Linking up with the proletariat in the nick of time! He'll start a new line of Manner-ings. England is evidently destined never to get rid of them. Has any other member of the family taken the proletarian plunge?"

"Well, Douglas has left Iris and is living with a barmaid—who is going to have a child by him."

This news made him almost lyrical with delight. He insisted on being told every detail, and when I had revealed all I knew he exclaimed:

"I can see their whole future! She'll go into her uncle's shop. I'll bet it's a greengrocer's. Douglas will set forth before dawn in a dreary car to fetch the cabbages from Covent Garden. He'll produce an enormous family—all of whom will go on the dole. He'll knock

his barmaid about a bit—get drunk once a week—and fetch the cabbages every morning. He'll be radiantly happy. All his life he's been longing to leap into a dust-bin and pull the lid down tight. And now he's done it."

After the briefest of pauses, he began to bombard me with questions about all sorts of people but, before answering any of them, I said:

"What surprises me is that you don't seem to take any interest in Harold Teasdale."

"Why should I? I never had any money, so I had nothing to do with him. When I got your cable saying he had committed suicide, I did remember that I had a devil of a job, some years ago, to get the legacy old uncle Wilfrid left me out of him. But I got it—in the end. What's interesting about Harold Teasdale is that every one thought he was tradition incarnate. And perhaps they were right. Perhaps Harold Teasdale was tradition—at the end of its tether."

He lit a cigarette, then looked round the Square as if to convince himself that he was not missing anything of exceptional interest, but at last he turned to me and said:

"You must tell me what's happened to some people now—the others can wait. And the first is Iris. I have amusing reasons for wanting to know what is going to happen to her."

I explained that it would take too long to give all the details, then told him it was rumoured that Iris would get an allowance from her father—provided she made no attempt to see her children, and provided she left England.

I ended by saying:

"That's the rumour. It's also rumoured that she is entirely under Buck's influence and that he will go abroad with her—and live on her."

"That wouldn't surprise me. I can't see Buck going under. He's positive, and it pays to be positive—on every level. Besides, when all the humbug has been talked, plenty of men would like to be Buck. Buck is Caliban—in modern clothes. Well, Caliban is becoming fashionable nowadays. What I dislike about Buck is his crudity and he has a sadistic strain, which is tiresome. But, of course, he's not nearly so dangerous as Harold Teasdale—who was Caliban, disguised as Prospero."

"That's true enough. Buck could never deceive any one. He told me everything about himself the first time I met him."

"Just what I should expect. But—coming back to Teasdale—what did *you* make of him?"

"I think he was a very remarkable person," I replied, "and he had a type of will-power which is not easy to imagine."

We sat silent for some minutes, then Mannering threw his cigarette away and said impulsively:

"Let's walk round the Square. We'll leave our hats here. It's a masterpiece of a morning—even better than it was a year ago."

We began to stroll round the Square, but before we had gone a hundred yards he stopped abruptly and put a hand on my arm.

"Look! Isn't that delightful?"

An attractively dressed girl of about eighteen was standing in a shaft of sunlight, near the window of an antique shop. She was leaning slightly forward and this attitude emphasized the grace of her perfectly poised figure.

"Delightful!" he repeated. "But we'd better hurry on before she turns round."

"Why?"

"She might be plain, my dear fellow. As she is now—standing there in that shaft of sunlight—she will always have a place in the anthology of memory. If she turned round, you might find that she has a moustache or something dreadful. For heaven's sake, let's hurry!"

We raced by the girl, then I said:

"Your marriage will be an interesting affair. You've been married about a month. Well, a year ago, you defined fidelity—as a month."

"I shall be faithful to Carol. But when I say faithful, do not misunderstand me. Carol is a blonde and I shall be faithful to her—in terms of blondes. It would be unimaginative of her to expect more than that. After all, red-heads and brunettes belong to different categories. And so does thistle-grey."

"Thistle-grey?" I asked, somewhat mystified.

"Yes. Coming over on the boat there was a most attractive woman of about forty-five with thistle-grey hair. An enchanting person! She moved indolently and she had green, ironical eyes. She was amused, in a gay, detached kind of way, that men still found her exciting."

He drifted into a reminiscent day-dream for some moments, then added:

"You know, Drake, the usual conception of fidelity is based on a complete illusion."

"And that is?"

"It's based on the illusion that a man is one person—a single unchanging personality. That's grotesque, of course. A man is a cycle of recurring moods—not a fixed point."

"I take it, then, that you won't expect fidelity from Carol?"

"Heavens, no! That really would be the most frightful egotism. Besides, it would stunt her growth. And, incidentally, she would lack a standard by which to appreciate me. What I do expect from her is no mess, no muddles, and no resounding divorces. I expect her to use discrimination. But I most certainly do not expect fidelity as the word's used."

"Have you explained that to her?"

"Not yet, my dear fellow, not yet. After all, we're still on our honeymoon."

A moment later, he added:

"Let's stroll round the Square again, then we'll go back and have another drink."

"All right, and now perhaps you'll explain something which is a mystery to me. It's this. You've really no illusions about all these blondes and red-heads and brunettes. None whatever! You deliberately create illusions about them."

"Well—perhaps."

"You know perfectly well you do. So I can't imagine how you will survive the everyday intimacy of marriage."

"Ah, my dear Drake, I've thought all that out. It's one of the many reasons why I married money. If you lack money, you are the slave of space. You cannot move. Poverty, in marriage, means proximity. And proximity, of course, involves the death of every delightful illusion. You must have space—especially in marriage. Having kissed, you must part. To wake to a series of mutual yawns would destroy even a Romeo-and-Juliet passion in less than a week."

We returned to the table and ordered some more drinks, then he settled himself to watch people sauntering through the sun-dappled Square, or seated under the coloured umbrellas, or clustered outside the old print shops. His whole attitude suggested that he was in a stall at the theatre watching a scene in an exciting play.

"You'll be able to lunch and dine with me?" he asked suddenly. "There are so many people to discuss that we can only deal with one or two of them now. But there's one thing I've simply got to know right away and that is: What happened to Rupert the rat?"

I explained how Belinda had escaped and how Rupert had hypnotized another woman into backing "his movement"—with the result that all her financial affairs had been transferred to Harold Teasdale.

"That's roughly Rupert's story. I haven't seen him since Teasdale's suicide, but, according to rumour, Rupert and the lady are behaving like demented beings."

"What fools clever people are, Drake. What utter fools! It always

amazes me. Rupert is brainy enough, but he's a ghost—a ghost with a brain. But what you want in this world is instincts. Rupert has more brains than all the rest of us rolled together—bar one."

"Who's the exception?"

"Ernest. Incidentally, he's always interested me more than the others. What's happened to him?"

I gave him an idea of Ernest's tortuous relations with Ethel and his mole-like activities to secure evidence for a divorce. Then I told him that, in my belief, it was Ernest's decision to take his affairs out of Teasdale's hands which had precipitated the latter's suicide.

"All that leaves out more than it contains," I said in conclusion. "And it leaves Ethel out entirely. She's in the grip of a man called Purvis—who is about ten times as tough as Ethel ever tried to be. But why are you interested in Ernest? You've certainly nothing in common with him."

"I'm interested because I just can't believe that a man can reach Ernest's age and still be ignorant of the kind of person he is."

"And what kind of person do you think Ernest is? I've my own guess, of course, but I'd like to know how you see him."

"It's pathetically obvious. That aunt who brought him up petted him as if he were a girl—and Ernest adored it. Ernest is one of Nature's many mistakes. Nature, of course, is hopelessly inefficient and clearly has no use for modern theories about planning. Ernest ought to have been a woman. He must know that but, instead of accepting the fact, he rebels against it. He hates and fears women only because he hates and fears his own intensely feminine nature."

"That's certainly what Ethel thinks."

"Any woman would know it—instinctively. Women loathe Ernest because he knows too much about them. He really has *inside* information about them. But I'll tell you something pretty grim."

"What's that?"

"Ernest—without a bob. I can't imagine what will happen to him."

"Douglas says he'll prowl about back yards till he finds an old maid who'll give him a saucer of milk."

"Well, Douglas has no reason to love him. You can't be competitors from the cradle and retain any sentimental illusions about brotherly love."

He dismissed the subject with a movement of his hand and again gave all his attention to the life of the shadow-patterned Square.

Sometimes, when you are looking at a person, you suddenly feel you are seeing him from an entirely different angle and one which obliterates your former conception of him. This happened to me as

I watched Arthur Mannering leisurely surveying the passers-by. For the first time, it occurred to me that this casual, careless, lazy individual was a far more enigmatic being than I had ever imagined.

"I've made a discovery about you," I said suddenly.

"What's that?"

"You are a much more mysterious person than I thought."

"I know why you think that, Drake. It's because I've said nothing about Christopher."

I tried to speak, but he stopped me.

"No—listen! I know we'll have to discuss Christopher, but I wanted to postpone it. Actually, I would much rather not discuss him at all."

"Why don't you want to talk about him?"

"Because he is a dangerous person. That's why. Dangerous and disturbing. Well, I don't want to be disturbed. He's affected *you*—any one can see that—but I have no intention of being upset by him Which is one reason why I shall take very good care not to see him again."

I made another attempt to speak, but he stopped me.

"I know all about his gifts. I know he is a unique person. God alone knows what Christopher sees when he walks down a street—or when he looks at a man. I'd rather *not* know. I admit he's become an enormous influence—more and more people in America, as well as Europe, are becoming extremely odd as a result of his influence."

"Could you define that influence?"

"If you could, Christopher would not be dangerous. All I know is that it's a *unique* type of influence. He does not impose things on people—he wakes things in them. And he never wakes the same things in any two persons. Well, he's *not* going to influence *me*. And—this sounds absurd—but I would rather not discuss him."

"Do you mean you're afraid to?"

"Put it that way, if you like," he replied. "When you are dealing with a man who has hypnotic influence, how do you know that you don't become subject to that influence simply by discussing him? Or even by thinking of him?"

He paused for a moment, then went on:

"By all the evidence, Christopher is just a lunatic. He's given his colossal fortune to Beulah Island and in every way he goes on like a madman. But I know from personal experience that he does possess extraordinary gifts—frightening gifts. How you managed to live in the same house with him is simply inconceivable to me. Anyway, I've marked him off—once and finally. I won't see him—I won't think about him—and, after this, I won't discuss him. Christopher

used me a year ago to find you—although he could not have known of your existence. Well, I don't like being involved in something I don't understand. And I'm not going to be involved with Christopher. I suppose you're certain that's cowardice?"

"I'm certain of only one thing, and that is that modern people are insane—every man-jack of them. Our thoughts are insane—our emotions are insane—our very hopes are insane. We have become dehumanized. It is we who are mad—not Christopher. We have perverted our instincts, destroyed our intuitions, debased our intellect. We have, literally, ceased to be human beings. You were right when you said that Caliban was becoming fashionable nowadays. Well, I've no doubt that Prospero seemed a madman to Caliban. And Christopher seems a madman to us."

"But you don't seriously think, Drake, that people are going to alter?"

"We'll alter—or perish."

"You may be right, my dear fellow," he said lazily, "but I shall stick to my illusions."

"I doubt if you'll be able to."

"Why not?"

"You're too intelligent."

"Intelligent!"

"Yes. You're lazy mentally, but that does not alter the fact that you are intelligent. All the Mannerings, in their very different ways, have insight. And you certainly have."

"You really must go on, old boy. You can't leave it at that. I'm excited by your theory that I shan't be able to stick to my illusions."

"You won't. I tell you that you are far too *intelligent*. You'll get bored. Bored with easy living—bored with luxury—bored with a blonde wife under twenty."

"Over twenty, Drake, *over* twenty!"

"All right—*over* twenty. You'll be bored by blondes, red-heads, brunettes—and thistle-greys who move indolently and have green, ironical eyes. You'll be bored, because you are a Mannering. And the Mannerings are not really at home in this world."

"You're wrong, Drake. Shall I tell you why my pipe-dream will last?"

"Yes, why will it last?"

"Because I know it's a pipe-dream. Most people confuse their illusions with reality. I don't. So my illusions will last. Besides, I'm quite incapable of taking anything seriously—and I certainly have no hope for humanity as a whole. *That* is a pipe-dream, if ever there were one."

He lit a cigarette, but a moment later he turned to me and said:

"You really are the oddest person!"

"Why?"

"Because you have not mentioned yourself. You say nothing about your own affairs, although you've no job—you've probably very little money—and you don't know what you're going to do. In fact, you are in exactly the same position as you were a year ago."

"Not exactly."

"Why not?"

"I know what I'm going to do."

"And what's that?"

"I'm going to Beulah Island."

"You *can't* be serious!"

"Perfectly serious."

He stared at me, but at last he said:

"You're queer. You always were—and you always will be."

"Not as queer as the news in the papers."

He made a sweeping movement with his hands, then said:

"Make a bargain with me."

"Well, what is it?"

"Not another word about Christopher."

"All right. But, remember, you started to talk about him. I didn't."

"Where shall we lunch, Drake?"

"Cartons? Like we did a year ago?"

"Right! Cartons! But, before we lunch, let's walk to the Sacré Cœur. God knows if we'll ever stand there again together—looking down on Paris."

He paid the waiter, then we began to climb the narrow cobbled street leading to the Sacré Cœur.

THE END

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